

# India's Theaters of Independence

Even before India gained independence 50 years ago, such cities as Bombay, Calcutta, Ahmedabad, and New Delhi served as powerful engines of change. Since 1947, those cities and many others have become home to a quarter of all Indians—“dramatic scenes of Indian democracy,” our author argues, “where the idea of India is being disputed and defined anew.”

*by Sunil Khilnani*

**I**n that eternal city of the imagination, novelist R. K. Narayan's Malgudi, things began to happen after August 15, 1947:

For years people were not aware of the existence of a Municipality in Malgudi. The town was none the worse for it. Diseases, if they started, ran their course and disappeared, for even diseases must end someday. Dust and rubbish were blown away by the wind out of sight; drains ebbed and flowed and generally looked after themselves. The Municipality kept itself in the background, and remained so till the country got its independence on the fifteenth of August 1947. History holds few records of such jubilation as was witnessed that day from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin. Our Municipal Council caught the inspiration. They swept the streets, cleaned the drains and hoisted flags all over the place.

But the nationalist enthusiasm of the Municipal Council was not so

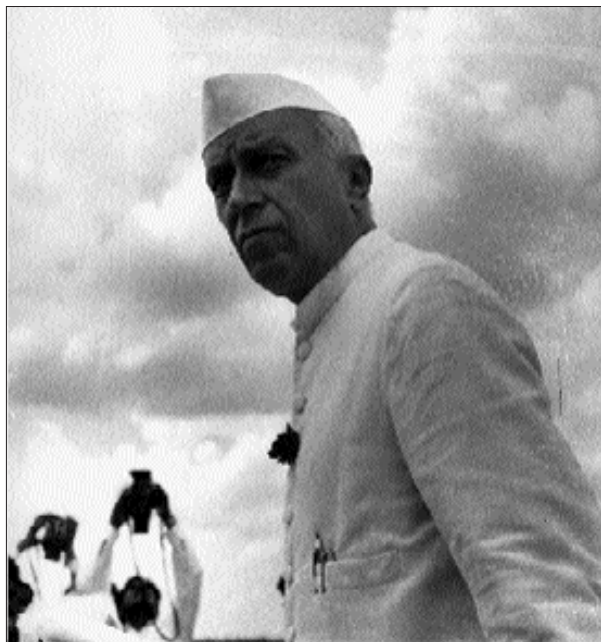
cheaply expended. No sooner had the celebrations ended than the chairman decided that more had to be done to make Malgudi truly free and patriotic:

He called up an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council, and harangued them, and at once they decided to nationalize the names of all the streets and parks, in honour of the birth of independence. They made a start with a park at the Market Square. It used to be called the Coronation Park. . . . Now the old board was uprooted and lay on the lawn, and a brand-new sign stood in its place declaring it henceforth to be Hamara Hindustan Park. The other transformation, however, could not be so smoothly worked out. Mahatma Gandhi Road was the most sought-after name. Eight different ward councillors were after it. . . . There came a point when, I believe, the Council just went mad. It decided to give the same name to four different streets. Well, sir, even in the most democratic or patriotic town it is not feasible to have two roads bearing the same name. The result was seen within a fortnight. The town became unrecognizable with new names . . . a wilderness with all its landmarks gone.

The Municipal Council's appreciation of the principles of rational urban cartography was undoubtedly impaired by an unusual excess of commemorative zeal, but similar second baptisms were sweeping through cities across India. Despite the ambivalence of nationalists toward the city—it was, after all, the theater where India's subjection to the British



*A commercial sign in Calcutta acknowledges the city's radical extremes.*



*Jawaharlal Nehru sought to make cities central to India's political and economic life.*

colonists was most graphically and regularly enacted—they could not turn their backs on it. They had to move into and inhabit the colonial cities, and dedicate them to their own desires and historical remembrances—it was here, in the streets of the city, that the memory of even that most stern censor of the modern city, Gandhi, was immortalized.

Since the nationalization of the streets and parks began in 1947, India's cities have changed utterly. They have become the bloated

receptacles of every hope and frustration reared by half a century of free politics and exceedingly constrained and unequal economic progress. More than a quarter of all Indians live in cities, some 250 million people, and it is estimated that by 2010 the figure will exceed 400 million, giving India one of the largest urban populations in the world. In legend and in fact India may still be a land of villages, but no Indian can today avoid the cities. Their very exclusivity, and the spreading rumors of their opulence, have made them almost impossible to resist.

**W**hat has brought Indians to the cities, or what has at least brought cities to their attention, is their economic dynamism. All the enticements of the modern world are stacked up in the city, but it is also here that many Indians discover the miragelike quality of this modern world. This experience has altered beliefs, generated new politics, and made the cities dramatic scenes of Indian democracy: places where the idea of India is being disputed and defined anew.

The major cities of contemporary India are either directly the creatures of colonialism or ripostes to it. They are discontinuous with India's own rich history of urban life, for the British, even as they sometimes plagiarized this history, saw India as a tabula rasa on which they could reinvent the city. The British Raj created a masquerade of the modern city, designed to flaunt the superior rationality and power of the Raj but lacking productive capacities. The modernity of the colonial city had a sedate grandeur to it, but it remained external to the life of the society.

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After 1947 India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, set out to recreate the city as not only the symbol of a new sovereignty but an effective engine to drive India into the modern world. The urban world created by this nationalist imagination is certainly no façade—as the country's vibrant and sometimes overwhelming metropolises attest. Yet India's cities have not quite fulfilled the nationalist expectations. Their modernity is not of a pure and happy kind, but a split and discontented one, full of darker, mixed potential. They have become spawning grounds for contrary conceptions of what India is: on the one hand a hyperbolic parochialism, on the other a bleached cosmopolitanism, both far distant from the tolerant Indian cosmopolitanism that the nationalist elite had proposed. As it did in the first half of the 20th century, the city continues to make the politics of India, but a politics far from what was intended and imagined in the early days when the street signs were so exuberantly and confusingly nationalized.

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The colonial city arrived in India in two distinct stages. The founding during the 17th century of the ports of Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay, dedicated to commercial extraction and the exhibition of wealth, linked India more closely than ever to the globally expanding economies of northern Europe, and established an enduring relationship of subjugation and uneven exploitation between these economies and the subcontinent itself. If the fort and government house formed one central axis of these cities, another ran through the wharves and docks. The second stage of the cities' formation began in the late 19th century, when the British built the more schematic cantonment cities, laid out as military encampments but made of brick and stucco rather than canvas. This stage culminated with the decision in 1911 to build the grandest of modern imperial cities, New Delhi—a monument to the display of power and order.

Throughout India, the British colonial city kept its distance from—and looked askance at—the existing cities. Places such as Murshidabad, Fyzabad, or Patna all might have picturesque architectural merits, but otherwise were best avoided. To the colonial eye, they were places of melancholy decay and flabbergasting squalor. The British desire to announce new-gotten wealth through conspicuous and freshly painted buildings, airy confections set in emerald parks (“an entire village of palaces” was how an awestruck visitor described Calcutta's grand British residential enclave of Chowringee early in the 19th century), found no match in the crumbling masonry, miasmatic air, and labyrinthine disorder of India's urban neighborhoods and bazaars. This view of the pre-colonial city was in time formalized into a more elaborate, academically glorified contrast between the Western and the Indian, or “Asiatic,” city. The latter, with its superstition, primitive and uncertain commerce, despotism, religious passions, and caste-ridden bonds, became a foil

against which to contrast the virtues of European rationality, industrial capitalism, civic government, secularism, and individuality.

But one can find in precolonial India vivid examples of cities that do not quite fit the easy dichotomies. The commercial center of Ahmedabad in the west is an exceptionally intriguing and neglected case. It was here, in the shadow of industrial smokestacks, that Gandhi launched his Indian political career on his return from South Africa in 1915, building his “Satyagraha Ashram” on the banks of the Sabarmati River. This is perhaps the only example of an Indian city modernizing on its own terms, without being dragooned through a phase of colonial modernity. Ahmedabad had a long history of self-generated prosperity, reliant neither on the patronage of a court nor on the exploitation of the surrounding countryside but on a tradition of textiles and manufacturing. Its history also showed considerable independence in the management of its affairs.

**A**hmedabad was not an independent city-state (no Indian city ever was); nor did it have formal authorities like a municipal government with territorially defined powers. From its founding early in the 15th century, it did, however, possess powerful mercantile and artisanal corporations and guilds. These corporations, or *mahajans* (whose membership crossed lines of sect and caste, sometimes even of religion), used their commercial powers to constrain interference by external political authorities. Hindus, Jains, and Muslims lived within Ahmedabad’s walls, but there was little history of violent religious conflict. The city’s prosperity, as well as its religious pluralism, was manifest in an architectural tradition of public buildings: fine mosques and mausoleums, Jain and Hindu temples, all sustained a civic tradition that continued into the 20th century.

Most striking of all was Ahmedabad’s response to the commercial challenge of British rule. Unlike other wealthy commercial cities on the subcontinent (nearby Surat, or Murshidabad and Dacca in the east), it did not decline with the emergence of the new port cities of Bombay and Calcutta. It flourished in the 19th century, and its textiles easily competed with European rivals in the international market. The city maintained its local cultures, language, and dress, and showed little taste for European products, although this changed slightly in the late 19th century, when some *seths*, rich merchants, began to wear socks and moved out of their carved wooden *havelis* in the old walled city to large, English-style stucco mansions set in the greenery of Shahibagh, north of the city. Uniquely, Ahmedabad turned its mercantile wealth into industrial success, and did so with no noticeable British investment and little disturbance of its cultural habits. That Ahmedabad, in its own unflashy way the first modern city created by Indians, could generate new productive wealth through its traditions of textile manufacturing and maintain its cultural character, was precisely why Gandhi adopted it as a home—and vital source of funds—for his new nationalist politics. (It was an Ahmedabadi *seth* who once muttered about how much it cost to keep the Mahatma in poverty.)



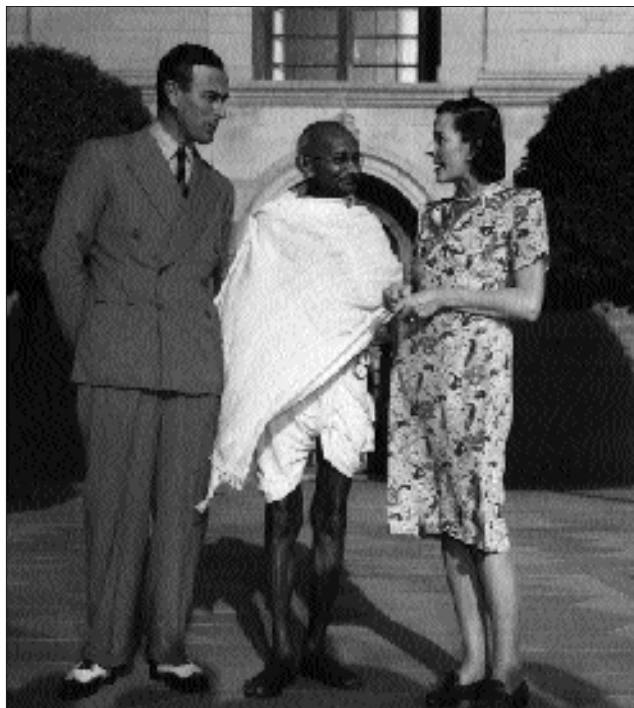
*The Islamic legacy lives on in the monumental architecture of Ahmedabad, one of the great economic urban centers of precolonial India.*

For all the “untraditional” aspects of a commercial and political center such as Ahmedabad, cities in precolonial India were undoubtedly very different from their European analogues. In 18th-century India, large cities could be found in all regions, linked to the countryside through smaller towns—*qasbahs* or *ganjs*, as they were called in the north—which acted as cultural and economic conduits. The intensity of contact among the cities was subject to varying historical rhythms: greater when empires flourished, lesser when they declined.

Precolonial cities were specialized. Besides commercial and economic centers such as Ahmedabad, Surat, and Cochin, there were destinations of religious pilgrimage such as Benares, Puri, and Madurai, which expanded and contracted in size in keeping with the religious calendar; and political and administrative cities such as Delhi and Agra, their ascendancy and decline hitched to the fate of dynasties. The conjunction of commercial and economic wealth with political and administrative power, typical of Europe’s major cities, was rare in precolonial India. Colonial ports such as Calcutta were the first such examples.

Internally, too, Indian cities were distinctively arranged on the basis of neighborhoods of work and residence, and segregated by small-scale castes, sects, and religious communities. Indeed, the movement of people and goods among cities followed avenues of caste: a migrant arriving in a new city would search out fellow caste members. Merchants, while often trading over long distances and by means of sophisticated accounting practices, would truck with members of their own community. The most notable case was the caste community of the Marwaris, who from their





*Mahatma Gandhi chats with Lord and Lady Mountbatten before a sovereignty conference in 1947.*

homes in Rajasthan built extensive commercial networks all over India.

Urban political or social associations were nothing like the “public” bodies that began to appear in 18th-century Europe. These European “societies” were in principle universally accessible to all individuals with common interests, but in Indian cities association was sanctioned by denser criteria of lineage, caste, and religion. Religious conflict was restrained, not, as later nationalists liked to

suppose, by a genuinely “composite” culture founded on an active and mutual respect among practitioners of different religions, but by routine indifference, a back-to-back neglect, which on occasions such as religious festivals could be bloodily dispensed with.

**S**ocial relations in these cities were neither impersonal nor governed by contractual arrangements of right and obligation. Social groups certainly performed duties for one another—for example, the wealthy would bestow charity on the poor and on religious mendicants—but such obligations were not enforced by public law or authority. That really was the crucial difference. These cities were not governed by publicly known rules that applied uniformly to all their residents and that a single authority could enforce.

And that was precisely what colonialism wished to change. The British Raj lived in the city, in compounds of its own creation external to the society over which it ruled. It molested the existing cities, the “old” or “Black” town, and constructed new ones. Impelled by the desire for greater security in the wake of the 1857 uprising, which briefly threatened British rule in the north, the colonial power disseminated its idea of the city with new vigor in the second half of the 19th century. The three port cities of Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay were already well-developed mercantile centers by the time India was absorbed into the British Empire and imperial rule proclaimed in 1858. The distinction between European and Indian “towns,” which had initially been characteristic of them, had softened with time.

But by the late 19th century a more focused concern with defense,

sanitation, order, and, above all, the display of the new imperial power overshadowed other considerations. India's cities fell prey to a fashion sweeping through other metropolises across the globe—Paris, Prague, Berlin, New York, Buenos Aires. Vast areas of the old cities were demolished. In Delhi, which had retained a strong sense of its precolonial habits and styles, the stately Mughal Red Fort was turned into a squalid barracks, its watercourses converted into watering troughs. Railway lines were struck through the central areas of the city. Ghalib, Delhi's greatest poet, made these observations in 1865:

Let me tell you the Delhi news. . . . The gate to Bara Dariba has been demolished. The rest of the Qabil Attar Lane has been destroyed. The mosque in Kashmiri Katra has been leveled to the ground. The width of the street has been doubled. . . . A great monkey, strong as a lion and huge as an elephant, has been born. He roves the city demolishing buildings as he goes.

New cantonment cities were constructed, more than 170 of them, dotted around the country and linked by railway, roads, and telegraph into a new geography of command. Their site plans varied little, strictly segregated into European and Indian sections, with the former in turn divided between the military and civil lines—where the civilian authorities and notables lived. “The European station,” wrote one observer,

is laid out in large rectangles formed by wide roads. The native city is an aggregate of houses perforated by tortuous paths. . . . The Europeans live in detached houses, each surrounded by large walls enclosing large gardens, lawns, out-offices. The natives live packed in squeezed-up tenements, kept from falling to pieces by mutual pressure.

The civilizing ambitions of the British Raj were routinely rehearsed in the city, but the rectangular securities of the European station did not mesh with any Indian conception, and Indians played little part in defining the meanings of the city. There was no prolonged duel, as in Britain or France, over what a city and its purposes should be, no jostling between crowds and the state that gave a political sense to the public squares or boulevards. The colonial conception was imposed.

**M**oreover, the only Indians who adapted to this imposition were the elites and middle classes, who by the early decades of the 20th century had grown to a substantial presence in the cities. They aspired to the glistening fruits of modernity tantalizingly arrayed before them—streetlights, electric fans, tree-lined streets, clubs, gardens and parks—and they willingly emulated the behavior and acquired the self-restraining habits of the modern city dweller. But to the poor, to migrants from the countryside, to the destitute, the British idea of a modern city was meaningless; it never reached them.

This stand-off was evinced by a trait that has repeatedly struck the eye accustomed to the modern city, a characteristic that nonplused colonials and that present-day visitors have ceaselessly fretted over: the stance that residents of Indian cities appear to take toward waste—refuse, excreta, death. Benares, for instance, seemed to the Western eye defective in its reluctance to rationalize social life by quarantining activ-



ities in different parts of the city. Death was at the very heart of Benares, not banished to its edges but mingled with its daily business: corpses were cremated on specified ghats, the great stone ledges descending to the Ganges, which were the city's most important common spaces. Benares seemed, to the foreign eye, indifferent to the need to constitute itself as a city of public arenas, with distinct borders between public and private acts, the hygienic and the nonhygienic.

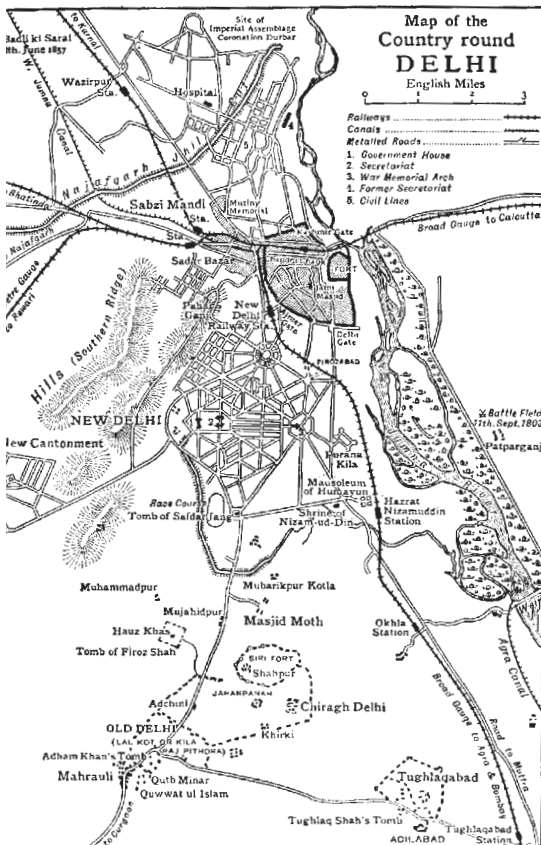
By the latter half of the 19th century, British perceptions of Indian urban life were preoccupied by its filth. Earlier, the British had been most discomfited by the infernal and sickening climate, but now the Indian city itself was threatening—and required control. This way of seeing the Indian city developed into an entire sensory response, and it became the natural nationalist mode of perception, too. Gandhi, describing in his *Autobiography* his first visit to Benares, could not hide his dismay:

I went to the Kashi Visvanath temple for darshan. I was deeply pained by what I saw there. . . . The approach was through a narrow and slippery lane. Quiet there was none. The swarming flies and the noise made by the shopkeepers and pilgrims were perfectly insufferable. Where one expected an atmosphere of meditation and communion, it was conspicuous by its absence. One had to seek that atmosphere in oneself. . . . When I reached the temple, I was greeted at the entrance by a stinking mass of rotten flowers. . . .

The British obsession with drainage and sewerage systems was matched by more elevated concerns. An empire, unlike a trading company, had to

announce itself to its subjects by grander means than shopfronts. Until the 1870s, the British had not directed much energy to displaying their authority—there had been the notorious “flag matches,” designed in the wake of 1857 to suppress any thoughts of sedition, but otherwise there was little parading about in public squares. The abolition and desanctification of Mughal symbols of power and legitimacy after the 1857 rebellion left a vacuum. The British response was to pirate the Durbar, which in Mughal hands had been a sophisticated, courtly ritual of political exchange and fealty between emperor and subjects.

The first Imperial Durbar,



held in 1877 at Delhi, formally proclaimed Queen Victoria Empress of India, or “Kaiser-i-Hind.” This ceremonial pantomime was justified to the more austere utilitarian mood in Britain with the claim that it pandered to the Indian need for awesome spectacles of authority. As the viceroy, Lord Lytton, put it in 1876, “the further East you go, the greater becomes the importance of a bit of bunting.” The site where the beguiling streamers were draped was northwest of the Delhi cantonment, in a purpose-built Durbar city, a five-mile arc of tents accommodating 84,000 people. The Durbar itself was an absurd mixture of medals, manipulation, and Teutonic drum-rolls: at its climax, the viceroy arrived on horseback to the “March” from *Tännhäuser*. Such performances changed the ways in which authority was thereafter displayed on the subcontinent, and the idea lives on in the Republic Day parades staged by the Indian state every January 16, the most vivid—and ironic—ceremonial vestige of the Raj. At the third such Durbar, in 1911, George V, with Napoleonic modesty, first crowned himself emperor and then announced the transfer of the Indian capital from Calcutta to a proposed site at Delhi.

The new capital at Delhi, built on a site south of Shah Jahan’s 17th-century Delhi and completed in 1931, was the summation of British efforts to hoist the imperial pennant on Indian territory. The coastal governing cities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras had not been built by a single driving vision: their fitful styles—classical, Indo-Saracenic, Gothic—reflected wavering ideological and aesthetic intentions. New Delhi was the pristine thing. Delhi’s attraction was both its rich historical associations as the seat of past imperial overlords and its provision of a virgin space on which the marshaled layout of the canvas Durbar city could be engraved permanently into the rocky Indian landscape, the chosen site where a late-imperial idea of power could be entombed. But New Delhi also had to illustrate a rational modernity.

**T**he design of the new capital, plum of all imperial commissions, was entrusted to that architectural Hector, Edwin Lutyens, and the more retiring Herbert Baker. The city they built was spread out as a spacious kaleidoscope of broken hexagons and triangles, pivoting on large roundabouts. The central axis, Kingsway (today’s Raj Path), took in the mammoth War Memorial Arch, sloped up to the focal point of the city, the acropolis on Raisina Hill, swept past the Jaipur Column, and came finally to rest at Lutyens’s *pièce de résistance*, the Viceroy’s House. The two blocks of the Secretariat, designed to be “the place of government in its highest expression,” were left to Baker. The Council Chamber, now India’s Parliament, an afterthought necessitated by the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919, which extended the Raj’s reliance on indirect rule, was apologetically tucked away in a corner below the hill.

New Delhi was a sublime fantasy of imperial control over the boundaries and definition of urban space. Its hexagonal grids were demarcated into segments for “gazetted officers,” European “clerks,” and Indian “clerks,” and distance from the central acropolis was gauged by rank—the quarters for Indian clerks were placed farthest from the center (this



*The Viceroy's House in New Delhi*

in a city of marooning distances and without public transport). Residential protocol was maintained by that essential document of colonial social decorum, the *Warrant of Precedence*.

New Delhi's calibration was not merely horizontal. Lutyens, obsessed with the city's physical elevation, was determined to define what he called a "line of climax." The houses of the junior Indians ("thin black") had to be physically lower and sited below the elevation of the houses of junior Europeans ("thin white"), and these in turn were placed below those of senior Europeans ("rich white"), which rose stirringly to the viceregal dome. This sensitivity to altitude explains something of Lutyens's rage during his famous "gradient quarrel" with Baker. So eager was he to acquire the actual summit of the hill for his construction that he surrendered the original—and lower—site chosen for the Viceroy's House. The result was a shock: the massive plinth of the building, set further back, according to Lutyens's instructions, had in fact become invisible from the point at the foot of the hill where subjects were enjoined to gaze expectantly up at it. All they saw was a disembodied dome.

*City* is perhaps too strong a term for what was built. New Delhi was besotted with being a capital rather than a city—it was a grand capitol complex with an attached residential campus. The modernity that New Delhi was designed to incarnate certainly impressed some. "The Viceroy's House is the first real vindication of modern architecture. . . . It is really modern. My admiration for Lutyens is unbounded," gushed the travel writer Robert Byron, when he visited the city in 1929. But it

was a modernity that erased every trace of its location. Lutyens gave New Delhi a single, aloof link, Minto Road, to what was now dismissed as the “old” city of Delhi, and he broke all connection with Delhi’s river, the Jumna. “Those who claimed to be modern in Delhi,” Nirad Chaudhuri noted, “had nothing to do with the river.” The superb ruins, tombs, and monuments of Delhi—the Purana Quila, Humayun’s tomb (doubtless the most perfect Mughal dome after the Taj Mahal), the more florid mausoleum of Safdarjung—all were pinioned by Lutyens’s axial layout and turned into follies on the imperial estate.

**C**olonialism, changing the status of the city in India as it did, created new instruments of rule that altered India’s urban textures. Greater and more regular contact between elites in the cities, not to mention administrative techniques such as a decennial census (introduced in a limited form in 1871), helped to unify the country: individuals and groups living in far corners of the country could now conceive of themselves as members of a single, large community.

This made it possible for the first time to imagine a common nation of Indians. But the enumeration and classification of individuals into categories of caste and religion, and the introduction by the Raj of electorates divided along communal lines, also solidified exclusionary identities. Unlike in Europe, where city air was expected to loosen the stifling social bonds of traditional community and to create a society of free individuals, in India the cities organized by the Raj’s policies reinforced contrary tendencies. Religious and caste groups, paradoxically, began to emerge as distinct blocs and to conflict with one another in the city itself.

The colonial imagination also rearranged urban interior spaces, driven by a desire to create a new public arena where behavior could be regulated by administered rules. The city henceforth had its “Instructions for Use,” which were successfully communicated to—and championed by—the Indian elites and middle classes, in the face of wider Indian indifference. Men such as Nirad Chaudhuri fully understood that space within the modern colonial city was arranged as carefully as the inside of a bungalow or an English garden. But to his daily despair in Delhi, his fellow Indians failed abysmally in their comprehension:

One ineradicable habit all Indians have is to take a shortcut to their destination whatever the risk to themselves or others. One striking illustration of this habit was provided for me. There was a bus stop just outside Mori Gate, and not more than twenty yards from it was a public convenience. But the passengers never went so far. They urinated on a tree nearby, and the poor tree died at the end of six months. In northern India men are never able to resist a wall or a post.

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**S**ince the colonial city was both emphatically the site of India’s subjection, the place where it was most regularly harassed by its rulers, and also an object of Indian craving, housing the promises of modernity, Indian nationalist attitudes toward it were ineradicably ambivalent. Nationalism was the politics of an urban educated elite that

presumed itself entitled to negotiate with the British and speak on behalf of the country's villages. For the early nationalist generations, independence meant being free to emulate colonial city life; it promised the opportunity to take up addresses in the residential sanctuary of the civil lines, to create a world where public trees would flourish unabused.

**B**eginning in the 1920s, Gandhi worked ceaselessly to disturb this desire to emulate. He reversed priorities and embraced the very values the colonial imagination rejected. Drawing upon romantic Western beliefs about the Indian village and the virtues of craft production, Gandhi promoted the idea of the village as a counter to the colonial city. He composed his own pastorate, and used it both to disrupt the order and regularities of the colonial city and to ridicule the hollow mimicry of the Indian elites and middle classes. He brought the nationalist idea from the city to the villages, and through the long foot marches he took across the countryside, his *padyatras*, he constructed a new topography of India, defined not by the railway tracks that linked cities but by routes that connected villages.

But Gandhi himself acted both in the city and in the villages. Indeed, until his retreat to the ashram at Sewagram in the mid-1930s, his regular scene of action was the city. His audience was found here, and it was his incomparable ability to mobilize the urban classes that explained his initial successes. He recognized the extent to which the British Raj was a creature of its cities, and knew how little they meant to the lives of most Indians. If the cities could be paralyzed through nonviolent Satyagraha ("truth-force"), the Raj itself would be broken.

**G**andhi's politics of the city carefully spliced together two strands. He conducted a high politics of parleying with the British, and, equally, he devised an everyday, colloquial politics that brilliantly captured the colonial city's alien and commanding spaces for nationalist purposes, that defied and mocked colonial rules of public behavior. Gandhi did this with a mixed armory. He invented, for example, a sartorial ensemble—the dhoti, shawl, cap, and staff—that conjured up the village and that he wore in the public territories of the Raj. When Gandhi, dressed in this way, strode past the liveried Rajput guards and into the sparkling Viceroy's House in 1931 (just completed to Lutyens's designs) to meet Lord Irwin, he punctured the starched sanctity of British imperial pomp. Gandhi's decision to live in ashrams—communal quarters, situated often on the margins of cities—and to renounce the private chambers of city life continued this confutation of colonial priorities. Most important, he invented ways in which Indians could occupy and act in the public spaces of the Raj. After Gandhi, nationalist politics was no longer confined to debating chambers, nor did it skulk in the clandestine rooms of terrorism; it poured out onto the streets and *maidans*, or open spaces, in visible defiance of colonial rules, in crowds that literally allowed people to see themselves as a collective body. Before the mass presence of the moving image,





*Evening prayer: a scene from Old Delhi*

Gandhi pioneered a potent theatrical use of processional marches and public meetings.

India's colonial cities had few places where crowds could assemble. There were wide streets, *maidans*, parks, monuments, racecourses, and sports grounds, but the public square, that essential no man's land of popular gathering and protest in Western cities, had been avoided in the architectural design of colonial cities. Gandhi's mass public meetings became defiant nationalist inversions of the rules and gentilities of the colonial public meeting—they were announced by impertinent flyers urging Indians to attend the next "Public Meeting and Bonfire of Foreign Clothes." Mulk Raj Anand's novel of the mid-1930s, *Untouchable*, evokes the excitement of this nationalist desecration of the colonial city in its tumultuous closing scene: the cricket oval, emblem of imperial civilization, becomes a meeting place for a vast crowd, a microcosmic India: "Men, women and children of all races, colours, castes and creeds, were running towards the oval . . . to meet the Mahatma, to pay homage to Mohandas Karam Chand Gandhi."

It was obvious to Gandhi that colonialism had to be defeated in its modern fortress, the city, but the point of this victory was not simply to move into the citadels of the departed British. Freedom for Indians meant the freedom to reject the city and to recoup India's enfeebled civilizational powers in the sanctuary of its villages. But, in contrast to the Gandhian insistence that "the blood of the villages is the cement by which the edifice of the cities is built," other nationalists saw different meanings in the simple opposition between village and city. For



instance, B. R. Ambedkar, leader of the untouchables, mocked what in his view was the oppressive Gandhian fantasy of a free India based on the camaraderie of the ancient village: “The love of the intellectual Indians for the village community is of course infinite if not pathetic. . . . What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and communalism?”

**N**ehru, though marginally less scathing about the village, was equally unambiguous in his commitment to the city. This attachment was not based on a desire to ape the colonial conception: he wrote bitterly of the division of the Indian city between the neglected “densely crowded city proper” and the placid civil lines inhabited by the English and upper-middle-class Indians, on which no expense was spared because “nearly all the Big Noises and Little Noises live in the Civil Lines.” And he spoke freely of his dislike for the “official-ridden city of New Delhi” and its spiritless, colossal display of colonial modernity: “the Governmental structures of Delhi are not all very beautiful to look at, although some of them are obviously meant to impress.” Nor did Nehru intend, in choosing the city, a rejection of India’s past. He was drawn, aesthetically and sentimentally, to the old, to Old Delhi rather than New Delhi: “There is the spirit and the genius of an ancient city, where almost every stone tells you a story, where history is embedded even in the dirty lanes. . . . it has a definite and positive atmosphere which you can feel in your bones.” Nehru’s appreciation of the city came from his understanding of modernity, and from a distinction he drew between inauthentic modernity, represented by the colonial city, and a genuine, productive, and universal modernity, which India should not reject. The city was the indispensable hub of a modernizing process that would spread beyond its enclaves and through the whole society.

**B**y the time the British were packing their trunks to leave India, the emulative will of the Indian middle classes had, despite Gandhi’s strictures, made the colonial centers very passable editions of modern cities. The Indian elites had carved out their own spaces of recreation and leisure—parks, cricket grounds, clubs—the streets were reasonably clean, coffee houses and restaurants served English menus. The lower and poorer orders were ghostly presences—they came in at dawn, did their jobs, and melted away into the obscurity of their shacks beyond the middle-class colonies. “Illegal” hawkers and vendors were regularly and successfully cleared from the streets by officers of municipalities that were often already in the hands of nationalist politicians—a result of the Raj’s economizing preference for indirect rule.

The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 introduced the first serious strains into this urban world. It imported a new threat into the public spaces of the modern city. In the past, religious conflict had been restricted to the “old” parts of the city; now it stalked through every street. And it brought into the cities, with unparalleled speed, large numbers of uprooted people. In a society where there was very little spatial mobility (in 1931 less than four percent of Indians lived outside the

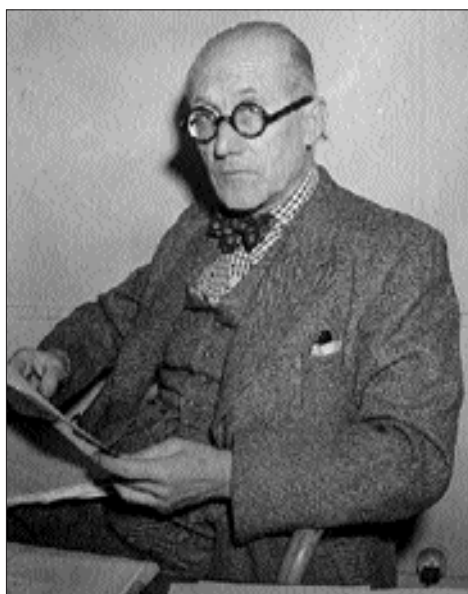
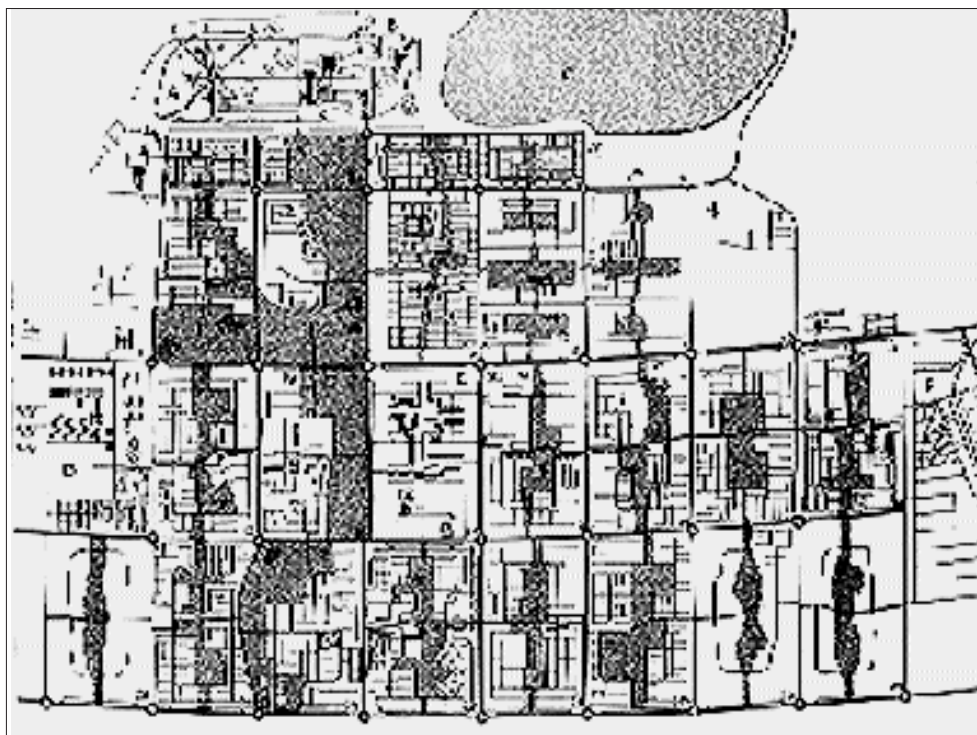
state or province of their birth), Partition unleashed the largest transfer of population in human history. Within a very few months, around 15 million people crossed the new borders (in 1951, 7.3 million refugees were registered in India, and in 1952 the Pakistan census counted 7.2 millions *muhajirs*, or refugees), and more than half of the refugees from Pakistan to India settled in urban areas. Between 1941 and 1951 the population of India's cities, swollen also by the war and the effects of famine, grew by over 40 percent. Delhi became a Punjabi city; Calcutta had to absorb hundreds of thousands of refugees from East Bengal; Bombay's Muslim elite was decimated.

The problems of resettlement, economic provision, and public order posed severe difficulties for both the state and the cities. Refugees were housed in temporary encampments that became permanent, ramshackle colonies. The poorest haplessly took up whatever empty space they could find along roads or railways lines, on vacant land, or in parks. One definitive trait of the future history of India's cities was established: a steady, irresistible flow of political and economic refugees, settling wherever they could, necessarily oblivious to the niceties of the intentions behind pavements, parks, or traffic roundabouts.

This was the immediate background to the building of Chandigarh, the new capital of the province of Punjab built after the old capital, Lahore, was awarded to Pakistan. Nehru saw the construction of Chandigarh, largely completed by the end of the 1950s, as a way to renew the Indian conception of the city and to display an Indian modernity distinct from and free of the colonial version. Like his British predecessors, he was attracted by the possibility of starting again, of constructing on an empty field a generous architectural proposition of the new India. The result was a monumental city, a glorious stage set where tableaux of state might be enacted but lacking everyday politics. Chandigarh was a city of politicians, bureaucrats, and administrators. Built after the waves of post-Partition migration, it was spared inundation by the poorest and most abject—though today it has its slums, and the city's real politics occurs in them and the populous slum villages that surround the city proper.

**A**s designed, Chandigarh lacked any of the productive capacities of modernity. Le Corbusier, its architect, was insistent that it must be solely a seat of government, not of industry and manufacture: "One must not mix the two," he stipulated in his eccentric and imperious manual, *For the Establishment of an Immediate Statute of the Land*.

If New Delhi belongs in an imperial portfolio of Durbars and imperial progresses, Chandigarh belongs in a nationalist album, with the Constitution and the five-year plans. Although a provincial capital, Chandigarh from its inception had the status of a national project. Nehru took a personal interest in it, and it was generously funded by the national government. The site was desolate but spectacular: 400 kilometers north of New Delhi, on a plain that sloped slowly, beneath wide blue skies, toward the Himalayan foothills. "The site chosen," Nehru explained, "is free from existing encumbrances of old towns," which would make the new city "symbolic of the freedom of India, unfettered by traditions of the



*The Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier around the time he received his commission to design the city of Chandigarh, characterized by its rigid geometrical plan (see detail above) and its austere modernist architecture (opposite page)*

past . . . an expression of the nation's faith in the future." But Chandigarh was also, and ultimately most decisively, the fantasy of its architect.

Twice in the 20th century, India has been visited by architectural megalomaniacs: Le Corbusier began work on Chandigarh barely 20 years after imperial New Delhi

was completed to Lutyens's plans. When two Indian civil servants arrived at his Paris apartment in the winter of 1950 and invited him to design the proposed city, he was privately ecstatic. "It is," he noted in his diary, "the hour that I have been waiting for—India, that humane and profound civilization," which hadn't "yet created an architecture for modern civilization," had now turned to him.

In his design, Le Corbusier remained blithely unencumbered by any understanding of the world he was building for. His role was that of the prophetic artist, and he played it to perfection. The initial plan was outlined after a bare glimpse of the site, a few days after his arrival in India

and with Lutyens's redstone megaliths lodged in his mind. (He had come via New Delhi.) Maxwell Fry, a collaborator on the project, remembered the moment: Le Corbusier held the crayon in his hand and was in his element. "Voilà la gare," he said, "et voici la rue commerciale," and he drew the first road on the new plan of Chandigarh. "Voici la tête," he went on, "et voilà l'estomac, le cité-centre."

Devoted to authority, Le Corbusier saw himself as a modern-day Colbert, and in Nehru he believed he had found his very own Sun King. Whenever he stumbled across some local obstacle to his ideas, the regular refrain in Le Corbusier's notebooks was a simple injunction: "Write to Nehru." Engaged in what he saw as a pharaonic project (working in India seemed to teach him "the advantages of slavery in high and noble works of architecture"), he preened himself for the role: "Be implacable, whole, haughty, in charge. Make demands."

Le Corbusier was, to be sure, an odd choice as democratic India's first architect. But the sheer audacity of his conception, and of Nehru's com-



mitment to it, is revealing. The design of Chandigarh expressed one aspect of Nehru's idea of a modern India: the sense that it must free itself of both the contradictory modernity of the Raj and nostalgia for its indigenous past. The rationalist, modernist strain in Nehru's thinking here obliterated the attachment to the heritage of an Indianness rooted in the past. Chandigarh boldly divested itself of history, rejecting both colonial imagery and nationalist sentimentalism or ornament. The literal, utilitarian names of its axial avenues (Madhya Marg, Uttar Marg—Central Avenue, North Avenue) recount no nationalist history (no ubiquitous Mahatma Gandhi Road here). It has no nationalist monuments, because Le Corbusier specifically banned them. The city's radical meaning lay in its cultural unfamiliarity, its proposal of the new. It refused to concede anything to its location, and acted as a kind of shock to India's built environment. Moreover, in celebrating a wholly alien form, style, and material, it aspired to a neutrality equally resistant to

the claims of any and all cultural or religious groups.

Chandigarh cheerfully ignored a topic that had troubled both nationalists and some of the British: the idea of an Indian “national style,” endlessly debated in the early decades of the 20th century by men such as E. B. Havell, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and the Tagores, Rabindranath and his cousin Abanindranath. Chandigarh’s evasion of historical tradition generated its own stories, which struggled to give the place cultural resonance. Hence the forced claims of architects and architectural historians that its design had originated in the figure of the primeval man (*purush*), or was based on the principles of the Vastushastra, the ancient Indian science of architectural construction; or that its buildings refer to the Dewan-e-Khas at Fatehpur Sikri, or to Hindu temple complexes. These attempts to make it recognizable, to locate it in India, all miss the point. Chandigarh’s deliberate renunciation of a national style was itself a gesture of acknowledgment that political authority in India now had to face outward too, that its sovereignty had to be internationally recognizable: its purpose was to place India in the world.

**Y**et if Chandigarh echoed anything on the Indian landscape, it was New Delhi. It reproduced the same fetishism of the capitol. The capitol complex, conceived of as the “head” of the city, was placed at the highest, northern end of an irritatingly even plain, striving like Lutyens’s acropolis for maximum elevation. For Le Corbusier, the capitol had to be defended from the rest of the city: “Hide all construction of the city,” he instructed. He referred to the buildings to the south, where the city stretched, as “l’ennemi,” to be screened off by bunkerlike mounds. Today, these serve literally as military fortifications, patrolled by armed guards who defend the embattled symbols of the state in Punjab. The capitol was intended to be a composite of four related buildings, arrayed around a central square: Secretariat, Legislative Assembly, High Court, and the Governor’s Palace. The latter was Le Corbusier’s response to Lutyens’s Viceroy’s House, and although it was more restrained, Nehru thought it too delusively grand for a mere provincial officer of a democratic state, and it was never built. The immense square plaza, intended as a public space, survives today as a desolate concrete pavement where no one passes, let alone congregates.

Chandigarh’s disposition of residential space also mimicked New Delhi’s pomposity. The residential area was divided into 30 neighborhood blocks, or “sectors,” all organized in a repeating pattern. The sectors were graded by the strict ranks of administrative hierarchy and were also internally differentiated: houses were identified by plot number, and the lower the number, the larger the plot. Every Chandigarh address thus encoded fairly precise information about its owner’s standing in the bureaucratic and economic hierarchy.

Chandigarh never achieved the cosmopolitanism it craved. Instead of ruling, enlightening, and modernizing its society, this city of the future became a museum piece in need of protection from its own violently quarrelling citizens and the ravages of the climate. Its vacant, eerily ordered center was ignored by the teeming and disorganized expansion of the industrial townships of Panchkula and SAS Nagar (which fall within the boundaries of the



city), whose economic dynamism helped to make it one of India's fastest growing urban regions during the 1960s and '70s. In that sense, it could claim a certain success. But Chandigarh failed to produce a society of secular individuals or a modernist politics. Drawn into the vortex of Punjab's politics, it was turned into a cipher in a battle of communal identities.

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**I**t hits you on the head, and makes you think. You may squirm at the impact but it has made you think and imbibe new ideas, and the one thing which India requires is being hit on the head so that it may think. . . . Therefore Chandigarh is of enormous importance.”

So Nehru explained Le Corbusier's modernist hammer to his compatriots, trying also to reassure himself. Chandigarh spawned additional provincial “concept” capitals in the 1960s and '70s: Otto Koenigsberger's Bhubaneswar, Bhopal, and Gandhinagar—the latter the one that most aspired to Chandigarh's image, a cruel concrete homage to Gandhi, which displaced Ahmedabad as the capital of the western state of Gujarat. These new cities were left to the mercies of chief town planners and their engineers at the local branches of the Public Works Department, or PWD, as it came to be universally known in India.

Nehru also animated the construction of industrial cities, steel towns such as Bhilai (“a city designed by a pencil stub and a six-inch plastic ruler. It was all parallel lines,” recalled one writer who grew up there), Rourkela, and Durgapur, pure, utilitarian grids laid out in bleak locations, industrial cantonments that managed to rise to a certain novel provincial cosmopolitanism. They brought together engineers, doctors, and technicians from all over India, aching with dietary frustrations, and each invariably had a colony of Soviet, German, or British experts, sweatily cursing their exile.

But Nehru was no Atatürk of modernism. If one impulse in Nehru's idea of the city aspired to break abruptly with the past, another was to treasure historical continuity, the layering of cultures, and the mixture and complexity that this layering nurtured. No colonial Indian city exemplified this mixture with finer sophistication than Bombay. It was also, unlike so many other colonial centers, a city of real productive and commercial wealth, historically the powerhouse of Indian economic modernization.

Bombay in the years after 1947 was an exception within India as a whole, an island unto itself. It was free from the heavy lumber of government bureaucracy, untroubled by the economic ideas radiating from New Delhi, devoted to amassing money and to burning it up in extravagant neon signs. It had long been much more than a mere colonial entrepôt and, in contrast to Calcutta, boasted a class of native industrial capitalists. Partition shook Bombay's settled cosmopolitanism. The departure to Pakistan of men such as Mohammed Ali Jinnah weakened the Muslim presence; it marked the beginning of the decline of the Parsee community—champions of Indian public life—and it brought tens of thousands of refugees into the city. But Bombay continued to be



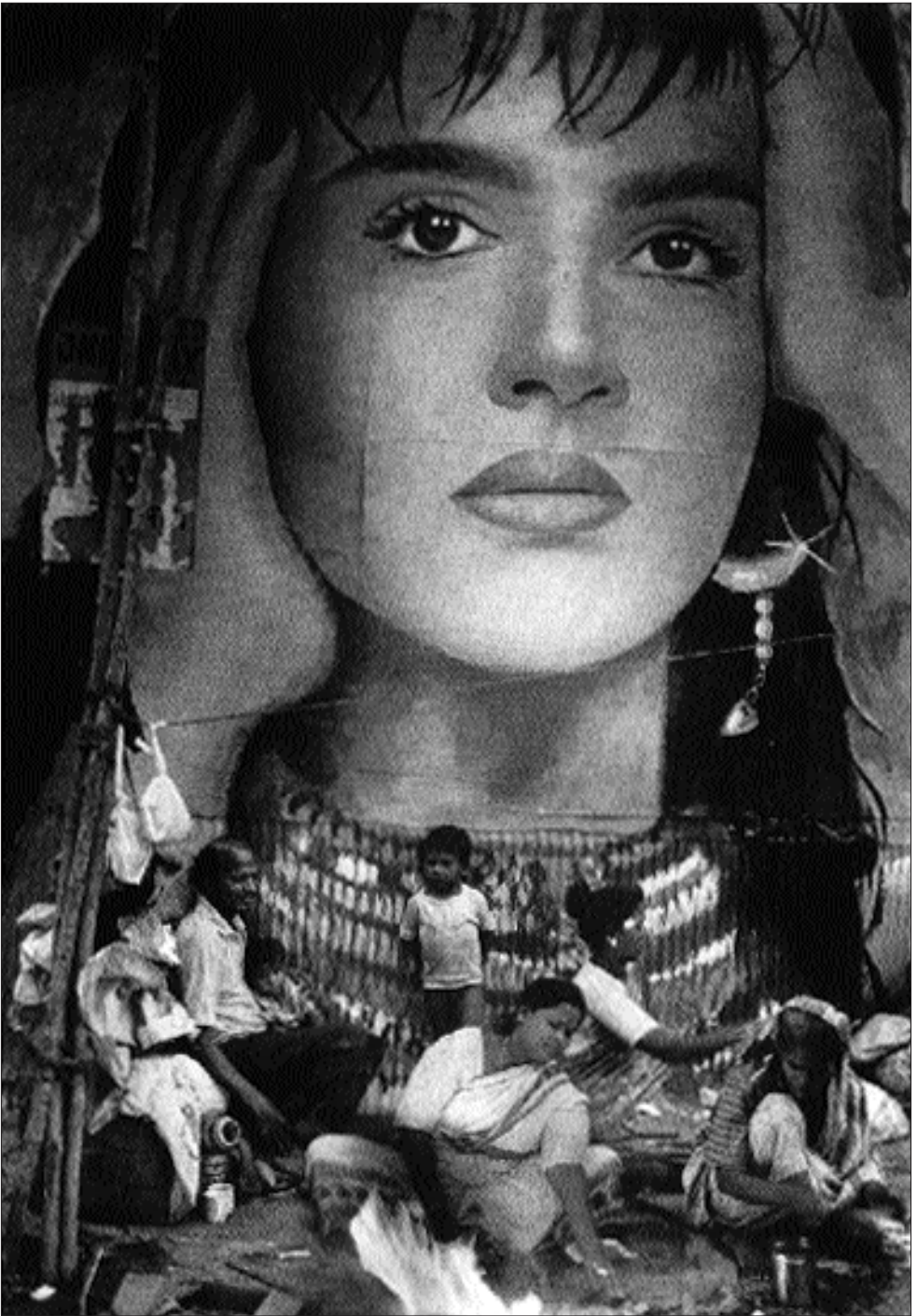
India's commercial and cultural capital, and soon became permanently lodged in the popular imagination as a totem of modern India itself.

What put it there was cinema. Most Indians had some visual image of Bombay: its cavernous tropical-Gothic railway station, Victoria Terminus; the seductions and brutalities of its criminal underworld; its pavements; its skyscrapers; the unforgettable sweep of the Necklace; Marine Drive. In the Hindi cinema of the 1950s, Bombay stood for a certain idea of India. A generation of actors such as Raj Kapoor and Guru Dutt, and radical scriptwriters such as K. A. Abbas, staged and sang a nationalist vision of India that was recognizably Nehru's own. In films such as *Awaara*, *Shri 420*, and *CID*, the city was portrayed as at once a place of bewilderment and exploitation, and an enticing and necessary destination brimming with opportunities. They conveyed its brashness and its impersonality, but also its emancipatory anonymity and the kindness of strangers it fostered. The stories were usually told through the eyes and sensibility of a Chaplinesque "common man," a vagabond or tramp happily endowed with an educated lower-middle-class sensibility, who struggles against the authority of tradition and the corruption of wealth, picking his way through Bombay's traps and bewitchments. Such films dramatized in a diffuse but evocative way a democratic, outward-looking, and secular nationalist sentiment, and affirmed the city as the most likely place to cultivate it.

But Bombay's own history since the 1950s has belied this picture—for this most modern, prosperous, and cosmopolitan of India's cities developed a different politics, an inflammatory parochialism in conflict with the nationalist ideal. Its political itinerary has traced the contradictions in India's economic development—which has delivered fabulous wealth to a very few, and has beggared most. Bombay's politics has been woven out of such contradictions, in a society enlivened by democratic sentiment.

Bombay's wealth flowed both from commerce and from its being the earliest industrial center in India. Its capitalists in the decades before 1947 tried to shape the choices of Congress Party nationalism and after 1947 maintained close—if, during the era of planning, somewhat tense and ambivalent—relations with the state. With the decline of planning and its conversion in Indira Gandhi's hands into an instrument of selective allocation and pacification based on economic controls and licenses, industrialists and politicians drew even closer together, their relationship based on buying and selling industrial licenses. Bombay's industrialists (and film stars) became an essential source of political funds for governments and parties in New Delhi, and from the 1970s contacts between them and New Delhi's political jobbers flourished.

Bombay's reputation as a city of industrial free enterprise and competition is shot through with irony. In fact, most of the industrial wealth amassed there in recent decades has benefited from monopoly licenses purchased in return for electoral finance and housekeeping money for the high politics of New Delhi, while the city's industry itself has become increasingly inefficient, a perverse monopoly capitalism sheltered from international and domestic competition. The old heart of Bombay's organized industry, textiles, declined steeply in the late 1970s,



*Film and reality in Bombay: migrant workers improvise a home under the poster of an Indian movie star.*

and the balance of employment shifted toward the uncertainties of the service economy, to the formal world of finance and banking, and to informal jobs in the workshops and homes of the city's slums.

**B**ombay's different types of wealth have colonized different parts of the city. The enclaves of the rich—the old commercial and industrial money set amidst the gardens of Malabar Hill, the opulence of the film world emblazoned on Pali Hill, and the newer profession-

al wealth stacked up in the ugly towers of Cuffe Parade—where all the amenities are concentrated, are set apart from the slums. But Bombay's congestion makes it impossible for the rich to flee the poor, and the contrasts of lifestyle are vividly adjacent (the population density in the city, at around 17,000 per square kilometer, is about 14 times greater than London's), though the congestion is unequally distributed. Far away from the spacious lawns and tea ceremonies of the Willingdon Club and the Bombay Gymkhana—secured on 99-year leases at one rupee a year—more than half of Bombay's population, between five and six million people, lives in slums squeezed into about eight percent of the land area. The residents of the slums are workers and the members of the educated lower-middle class, not the very poorest, who exist as they can on the pavement, in segments of sewage pipes, under flyovers—perhaps some 700,000 of them. The slums have received little from the Indian state in the way of even basic facilities, and budget allocations for urban development have always been minute.

**T**he result is a city that blisters with the aspirations, disappointments, and anger of the poor and the lower-middle class. Condemned to desperate conditions, they have had to put up with governments and politicians who chatter in the language of equality while acting and conniving in quite opposite ways. In Nehru's picture of Indian politics, democracy would in time enable the disadvantaged to pursue their own interests. Social conflict would center upon a struggle between rich and poor, as the poor came to organize for themselves and press for better terms. Yet this anticipated democratic struggle against poverty and inequality has no more emerged in India's modern cities than in its villages. The poor are now acting in politics as never before. They have understood that elections can be used to chastise and deliver small advantages: an electricity connection, a water tap, an access road. But even in the cities, where traditional bonds of community have loosened, a society of individuals banding together to pursue their several purposes through interest-based associations—the Edenic image of the liberal West—has not emerged. Urban economic inequalities and social diversities have given rise to politically devised communities of religion and caste. These proudly particularistic groups rarely ask the state to accord universal rights and provisions so as to bring about better treatment for all; instead, they insist on privileges and protections to be given exclusively to their own community, while others are neglected.

The frustrations of the poorer groups have not produced solidarities of class. The wide range of technologies deployed in India's efforts to industrialize, the local economies of labor and reward, and the ties of neighborhood and residence in a city such as Bombay—all have fragmented and differentiated the working poor and made it very difficult for them to sustain class associations. Nor have strong class ties evolved through consumption patterns. At the upper end of the social scale, a pan-Indian urban elite is able to glide sveltly through any hotel lobby in the land, but the consumption habits of the urban poor do not allow for a nationwide pattern to emerge. People living in a *chawl*, or slum, might club together to buy a

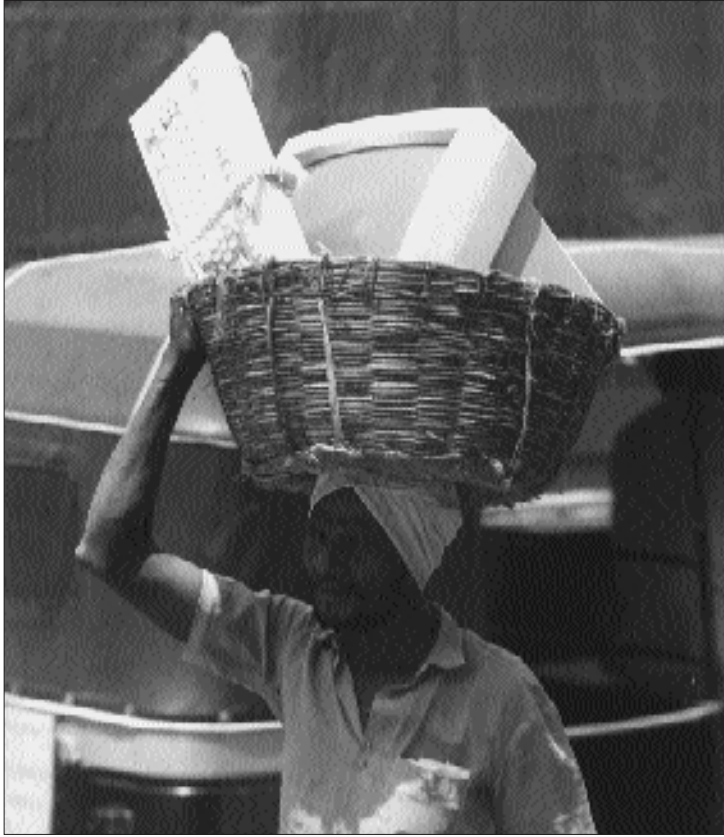
television and install a satellite or cable television connection. But this is hardly a sign of secure affluence, contrary to the view from Malabar Hill or Cuffe Parade (“See how well these servants are doing these days!”). All it represents is the assertion of an equal right to consume images.

**B**ombay has had its periods of active trade-union and labor politics, but the possibilities of interest-based solidarities have been further vitiated by the populist turn in democratic politics engineered by the dominant party, Congress. Whenever hints of such organization arose—as occurred, for example, in the late 1960s, when communist influence increased in the labor unions and city politics—local Congress politicians swiftly snuffed them out. Provincial Congress members gave the party an iron grip over the politics of Bombay and Maharashtra by systematically invoking caste and Maratha identity—based on the rural connections of workers—to mobilize the poor and lower-middle classes along vertical links of clientage, which secured electoral victories in the high politics of provincial assemblies and national parliaments. But this high politics, limited for most people to the sporadic experience of elections, was indifferent to the daily concerns of poorer groups. They were increasingly restive, undeferential, and unwilling to remain excluded from the politics of the capital city and from some share in the wealth so ostentatiously displayed around them.

The rise in Bombay of the Shiv Sena movement should therefore hardly occasion surprise: it expresses a deep potential within modern Indian politics and employs all its existing idioms. The Shiv Sena, the “army of Shivaji,” took its name from a 17th-century Maratha warlord who fought successfully against the Mughals. It was founded in the mid-1960s as an anti-immigrant party dedicated to protecting employment and educational opportunities for Bombay’s Marathi-speakers—about 40 percent of the population, generally in lower-level jobs. It has learned from the nationalism of high-caste Hindus, from the populism of Congress, from communist and Hindu extremist organizational methods, from the cinema and popular press, and above all from the streets.

It too wishes to make the city afresh, and it has internalized the nationalist faith in the magic of names so deeply that it has not only retitled Bombay’s parks and streets but has renamed the city itself, as Mumbai. The Shiv Sena’s initial successes derived from an ability to develop a quotidian politics with local goals, the achievement of which gave its supporters a direct sense of efficacy, but it also mastered the skills of high electoral politics. Its early targets were Tamils from the south—“all the lungiwallas” who, it asserted, were “criminals, gamblers, illicit liquor dealers, pimps, goondas, and Communists.” Its real animus, though, was neither moral nor cultural but, rather, a resentful belief that southern migrants to Bombay, privileged by their command of the English language, had monopolized the better-paid clerical and lower-management jobs.

**B**ut the objects of Shiv Sena’s enmity have proved changeable. To build electoral majorities from the poor and the lower-middle classes, it gravitated toward a basic line of religious difference, and in the 1980s turned against Bombay’s Muslims, who account



*In Bangalore, part of India's new Silicon Valley, a laborer carries a new computer to a customer across town.*

for 15 per cent of the city's population. It translated into local urban political terms the polemics that were entering the national arena, and it climbed on the back of Hindu nationalist politics by striking an alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1984. This parasitic relation to national politics and the central state is characteristic of the regional imagination Shiv Sena represents: it does not threaten the national state but depends upon it.

**T**he regular energies of the Shiv Sena, however, went into the routines of mundane politics, and it made little pretense of connecting to the distant narcissism of New Delhi. It exploited the democratic sentiment released by Indira Gandhi's electoral strategies, broke open the corrupt corridors of local politics, and encouraged entry by the lower-middle class and the poor. During an era when the organizational structure of the Congress Party was collapsing, the Shiv Sena drew its strength from an extensive network of "informal" politics, typical of cities such as Bombay. It established *shakhas*, or local branches, youth clubs, and *mitra mandals*, or "friendship associations," male fraternities supposedly inspired by the idea of individuals associating voluntarily on the basis of shared interests. These associations were captured by the Shiv Sena and used to propagate an anti-individualist, communitarian language, and a bowdlerized Marathi culture among



the young. Celebrating youth and action, the party is famed for processions led by posses of young men with attitude on motorcycles.

**T**he Shiv Sena has built its reputation on its provision of real cultural, medical, and educational services to Bombay's poor and lower-middle classes. But it should not be confused with the Salvation Army. Its services and rewards are distributed with fierce selectivity and presume the permanent exclusion of segments of the city's residents. Determined to win support by polarizing Bombay's citizens into majority and minority communities, the Shiv Sena has perfected techniques of brutal violence: throughout the 1980s it instigated riots on the outskirts of Bombay and in other Maharashtrian cities, always targeted precisely at Muslims and their property. And in December 1992 and January 1993, it carefully orchestrated riots directly after, and related to, the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu militants aspiring to construct a Ram temple in its place. During the January riots, for instance, Shiv Sena members and activists circulated through Bombay — in another bitter irony of Indian democracy — with electoral registers that enabled them to identify Muslim households to attack, a pogrom that imitated the actions of Congress Party members in New Delhi during the anti-Sikh violence of 1984. As in Delhi in 1984 so in Bombay in 1993; retraction of police protection for the victims revealed the extent to which this arm of the Indian state had been communalized.

After independence, Bombay had embodied most richly India's nationalist expectations of the city. Bombay, it was hoped, would fulfill the potentials immanent in — but also distorted by — the colonial city. Freedom would bring national economic development, a democratic politics of interests, an egalitarian urban form, and a cosmopolitan culture of individuals. "In Bombay all Indias met and merged. In Bombay, too, all-India met what-was-not-India . . . what was beautiful in Bombay was that it belonged to nobody and to all" — that old nationalist dream of Bombay, and the sense of its end, suffuses Salman Rushdie's lament for the city in his novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). That vision has been surpassed by the history that the nationalist ideal itself set in motion, but the challenge to it is not a simple contrary one that rejects the city in favor of some other ideal such as the village.

The political imagination of a movement such as the Shiv Sena shares with the nationalist movement the ambition to have a modern, rational, clean, and functional city. But Shiv Sena differs entirely in its idea of the India in which such a city can exist. Its provincial, partial idea of the nation does not envisage a fragmentation or disruption of India's political unity, it does not demand substantially greater autonomy from the center, and it is committed to the idea of a strong state. Nor does it challenge India's democratic nature. On the contrary, it thrives on the spread of democratic sentiment throughout Indian society. The difference lies in its conception of the cultural substance and units that constitute India. The Shiv Sena visualizes India not as a land of cosmopolitan miscegenation but as a hierarchical grid that contains



internally homogeneous communities, each insulated from the others. This idea seeks to efface Bombay's cosmopolitanism, to annex its modernity and distribute the benefits of it to one, closed community.

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By the 1990s, the Indian city had entered a new, postnationalist stage. The established cities had deviated from what had been anticipated of them. Their economic inequalities and their political opportunities had sharpened contradictions and had produced more partial, if more intensely held, conceptions of what a political community was. The old contrasts between the city and the village, or the colonial city and the nationalist city, had ceased to hold. The city in India was being reinvented once again, in contrasting models. An aggressive small-town India was surging across parts of the country, impelled by rural economic surpluses. This new urban type, in limbo between city and village, proudly proclaimed its vernacular cultural and political tastes. Simultaneously, the entry into India of new forms of economic capital, owned by transnational corporations, was driving forward a new professional upper class, mobile, ambitious, and in search—as its colonial and nationalist predecessors had been—of unsullied ground on which to set its imprint.

Since the 1960s, parts of rural India had experienced considerable economic development and had accumulated surpluses. The sources for this new affluence varied: the “Green Revolution” in agricultural productivity in the north, a “White Revolution” in dairy farming in the western regions, and in the south remittances from emigrants working in the Persian Gulf states. Money was invested in small industries and in properties in provincial cities and small towns. In the north, some of the fastest growing areas in the 1980s and '90s were provincial cities such as Faridabad, Ghaziabad, Ludhiana, Meerut, Muzaffarnagar—built-up sprawls stretching along the national highways deep into the countryside, blurring distinctions between village and city.

India has more than 200 cities with populations of more than 100,000, and these are the homelands of India's “new middle classes,” who no longer gaze enviously at the distant metropolitan cities, whose horizons are not shaped by ideas of Bombay or New Delhi—cities that, if anything, they resent and disparage. This is the India of ZEE TV and cable television, more rawly and frankly consumerist than the nationalized Doordarshan, which transmit an arresting linguistic hybrid of Hindi and English. Most big-city opportunities for consumption are available in these new towns: Maruti car sales rooms, hotels and fast-food restaurants, shops selling Reeboks and Proline, Titan watches, and Videocon electronics.

But surfaced roads, pavements, streetlights, parks—all those essential tokens of modernity that excited the colonial and nationalist imaginations—are barely to be seen here. The streets are nameless, absolving those who pass along them of even a token historical memory. The conceptual sense of a “city” is weak. There are few civic amenities, no urban form, no effective police authorities. And these localities' scale—smaller



*Tinsel chariots were part of L. K. Advani's efforts to whip up popular support for his Hindu nationalist party.*

than the metropolis, with its potential to generate anonymity and impersonal relations between strangers—has fostered new and distinct kinds of social relations, neither modern nor traditional. Ties of kin and caste remain strong but operate on a more expansive terrain than in the village, and have acquired a thinner, more instrumental form.

**T**he sensibilities of these provincial towns have begun to impose themselves upon India's national politics. These towns are electorally important, and they have become sites of sharp contests as parties try to establish majorities. The absence of any neutral arm of the state to police and to provide protection, especially in regions such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, has left this essential responsibility to the discretion of politicians and men who command armed gangs, which gives these towns a culture of violence. The conflicts have taken one of two forms. On the one hand, upwardly mobile intermediate castes, successful middle peasants, and “bullock capitalists” who maintain properties in and strong connections with their villages, have made these cities the heartlands of a vigorous caste politics, encouraged by the partial implementation of the Mandal Commission's proposals on reservations. On the other hand, these cities have also become recruiting grounds for the BJP's Hindu nationalists. The BJP's brand of televisual religion is attuned to the desires of these cities' inhabitants, and the mobilization of their votes has become an essential element in the party's strategy.

L. K. Advani's *Rathyatra* of 1990, for example, a chariot procession that covered more than 10,000 kilometers, took in dozens of such cities. As the *rath*, a tinsel chariot erected on a Nissan utility vehicle, rolled across the plains from town to town—sparking violence and riots wherever it went—signs were put up declaring that these towns had been “captured” and were now part of a “Hindu state.” In a reversal of the Gandhian idea of a *padyatra* linking the villages, Advani's *Rathyatra*

hoped to spread a sense of Hindu unity across the country by connecting the new towns.

**I**n contrast to the garbled modernity of these northern towns, a quite different trend is represented by the city of Bangalore. The capital of the southern state of Karnataka and the most Anglicized city in India, Bangalore was established as a British cantonment early in the 19th century. During the colonial period, Bangalore fell within the princely state of Mysore and was not given to bursts of nationalist enthusiasm. There was no wholesale repainting of street signs after independence, and Queen's Road, Kensington Road, St. Mark's Road, Brigade Road, and Cubbon Park are all still there. The city has long been solidly middle class, and the colonial layout has kept its shape well. Bangalore has its slums, but they are fewer and less evident than in other Indian cities. The city is, however, sharply divided between the northern cantonment areas, primarily Tamil, and the poorer Kannadiga areas in the south of the city. Its climate, parks, and greenery made it a retirement destination for civil servants and military officers. In addition to its physical attractions, its educational and scientific resources made Bangalore a choice site, in the 1950s, for several large state-owned defense and communication industries. It became an established center of scientific research and developed a wide technological base. Since the 1970s it has experienced rapid growth, and new Indian middle and upper classes have emerged. They are based not on the traditional sources of wealth in independent India—control of land, bureaucratic office, or industry—but on professional and technical skills. Unable to break into the exorbitantly priced property markets of a city such as Bombay, these highly internationalized and entrepreneurial classes—many of whose members possess qualifications from America, not from the old elite educational metropolis of Britain—have adopted Bangalore as the strongest alternative incarnation of Indian modernity.

These new classes have been sustained and given substantial economic power by the arrival in India, especially after economic liberalization began in 1991, of foreign capital and multinationals: Hewlett-Packard, Asea Brown Boveri, Agfa, and IBM have all been attracted to Bangalore as a source of cheap skills. These companies have transformed the wage structure of the Indian professional world. They are able to offer Indians in their late twenties salaries not reached even at the retirement points of Indian public-enterprise salary scales. Bangalore is the gateway for this new international private capital, which until the 1990s played a minute role in India's insulated economy.

**T**here is nothing in India that could withstand the economic power of such corporations; they are potentially irresistible. But the Indian social classes that depend upon them are simultaneously very vulnerable and without any economic allies. Indeed, to bureaucrats, businesspeople, and industrialists, these professional classes are galling parvenus. Their internationally franchised tastes make them ready targets for moralizing politicians and cultural nationalists. For their part, these new classes have horizons that are

unconstrained by the territorial frame of the nation-state: they pride themselves on their international mobility, and are quite prepared to forsake the shopping malls of Bangalore—Big Kidskemp, Fifth Avenue, Barton Centre, all still with a somewhat ersatz air about them—for the real thing in Singapore (or wherever) should the opportunity arise. Bangalore has become the capital of non-resident India. Like the Indian politicians, industrialists, and film stars who choose to use the banking facilities of Vaduz and Zurich, these new classes too have a secessionist understanding of the idea of India.

Bombay and Bangalore: each is an avatar of the contrary potentialities of India's modernity, each manifests an exhaustion of the nationalist imagination. They have spawned ideas of India at sharp variance with Nehru's. To an adherent of the Shiv Sena in Bombay, defining oneself as Maharashtrian, or Hindu, seems to deliver more direct benefits. Indianness has become an instrumental choice, a less advantageous identity. Likewise, to the young M.B.A. or software expert in Bangalore, India is merely one stopping place in a global employment market.

India's cities are hinges between its vast population spread across the countryside and the hectic tides of the global economy, with its ruthlessly shifting tastes and its ceaseless murmur of the pleasures and hazards of modernity. How this three-cornered relationship develops over the next decades will decisively mold India's future economic, cultural, and political possibilities. The demographic drift across the world is unstoppably toward the urban: more than half the global population will soon live in cities. Yet India, in this as in so much else, will remain something of an exception. Despite the vast absolute numbers that continue to cram its cities, most Indians will still make their lives on the land. The contradiction runs deep. Will India's cities, bolstered by—but also subject to—the dynamism of global capital, come to direct the country's economy, to manipulate opportunities in their favor and make the culture in their own image? Or will the countryside be able to turn to its advantage the democratic power of its numbers, enter the state that resides in the metropolis, and bend it to its own purposes and hopes? How much longer can India's cities remain a modern veneer, by turns glittering and blistered, over the contradictory life of its society?

