

Other Scenes

John Wilcock

1969

Bombay (pop. 5 million) is India's second biggest city and the one nearest to Western tastes. It's Hollywood, New York and Chicago rolled into one, and almost every visitor has a friend or a contact there or can easily find one. The Jehangir Art Gallery specialises in modern contemporary work and so many of the creative types, including writers and young film makers, hang around there or in one or another of the smaller galleries nearby.

The movie industry, though devoted to those typically ephemeral Indian films that are full of coy boy-and-girl chasing around pillars, bursting into song and dance below an ever-blue sky dramas, is the second biggest in the world (after Japan).

The city's industry—comprising more than 300 textile mills and almost 3,000 other factories which ring the city on massive industrial estates—make it the wealthiest city in India, too, and building never stops. A tremendous new hotel, the Oberoi Sheraton, will be topped off this year with a revolving restaurant and an exterior glass elevator and the only sidewalk restaurants in India, on Vir Nariman Street overlooking Bombay's Marine Drive, will be supplemented by one in which the patrons sit in revolving gold cages to sip their espresso.

Meanwhile, as they drill for oil in the city's magnificent harbor, the devotees of the Moslim saint Haji Ali debate angrily whether to remove or retain the big neon sign advertising biscuits that adorns their mosque across the bay.

It was Britain's East India Co. that managed to link together the seven islands of the Bombay area into one compact city. But nobody has yet managed to merge the various sects and creeds—the Punjabis, Parsis, Muslims, Gujaratis, and South Indians—who give the city its rich diversity and business enterprise.

Among the fastest-growing of Bombay's smaller businesses is the Mysore Sugandhi Dhoop Factory whose name is increasingly familiar to hippies because it can be found on more than 130 different varieties of incense the company manufactures in a battered, yellow building on the outskirts of the city. Exporting the incense has gotten to be a major item for the company and its manager is currently in the U.S. taking orders from such outlets as SF's Haight Street head shop whose product is packaged and labeled with their own name here in Bombay.

Incense making is quite straightforward, the thin red sticks being stripped from bamboo in Bangalore and then shipped to Bombay to have the oily paste of charcoal or powdered sandalwood applied to each sliver. Unromantically enough, the dried sticks are then spread out by the handful to have chemical perfumes poured over them and, being dried once more, are weighed and slipped into tubes usually made from old newsprint. The handsome labels on each box or tube are designed and printed on the premises.

Bombay has managed to abolish the cows from its inner streets and even the ubiquitous beggars are rarely to be seen beside the city's major landmark, the towering, stone Gateway of India which the British built in 1911 to honor a royal visit and through which the last British soldier left the country when India achieved independence 36 years later.

The guests at the nearby Taj Mahal Hotel—one of the most elegant hotels in the world—rarely see Bombay's other side: the quarter of a million barely-employed who subsist on begging, stealing, prostitution and portage in some of the world's worst slums on the fringes of the back bay. Occasionally the tourist will encounter a black

market money changer on the street (9.50 rupees to the dollar instead of the bank rate of 7.30) but he is usually a successful “businessman” compared to most of Bombay’s impoverished classes, his contacts being with rich Indians who are willing to pay handsomely for the currency that legally they can’t obtain to buy foreign luxuries.

It has been estimated that as many as ten percent of Bombay’s millions earn their living by begging, many of them belonging to organized rings. Heartbreaking stories are common of small children being kidnapped from other states and then being deformed or having limbs broken before being sent out to beg. Their earnings are turned over to their masters each night in return for a place to sleep and subsistence meals. Many of the so-called sadhus are vicious criminals posing as holy men to evade the law. The focus for many of them is the Chor Bazaar or so-called Thieves Market which, probably more than similar institutions throughout the world, richly deserves its name.

The aristocrats of the Bombay underworld are the Dadas, a powerful class who own slum tenements and run most of the rackets and illicit stills. In his book “Portrait of Bombay’s Underworld” (Manaklata & Sons, Bombay, 4 rupees) a local reporter, Kluamarva Balakrishna, alleges that there are at least 15,000 such stills in the city—where prohibition is supposedly in force—and that the police are paid off to ignore them.

Gandhi had taught Indians to speak no evil, hear no evil and see no evil, the newsman wrote, adding that this was the only way the average Bombay resident could manage to coexist with the evils of the city around him.

Bombay has one of the country’s best-known newspapers, *The Times of India*, but this pales beside the existence of *Blitz*, a flashy tabloid that claims to be the only newspaper circulated Throughout the whole country. With a circulation of 200,000 in English, *Blitz* also publishes weekly editions in Hindi and Urdu and is a lively melange of left-wing crusading, scandal, social comment and humor.

Its founder and editor, R.K. Karanjia, who began the paper 26 years ago, has met everybody of any consequence who’s visited India and made dozens of trips outside to chat with such world figures as Castro, Kruschev, the Pope, Nasser, Churchill and Tito. He was an apostle of Gandhi, about whom he still runs an occasional article, and a friend of Nehru. He once set off on a world tour but was refused admission by both Russia and the U.S. which confirmed his belief that communism and fascism are much the same.

Karanjia tends to dramatize his encounters with authority—he swears that America is so anxious to sabotage *Blitz* that the U.S. has financed several unsuccessful rivals—but there’s no doubt he fights a lot of worthy battles and has been reprimanded by Congress and jailed once for contempt of court. Some of his critics seem particularly infuriated by a weekly pinup he runs on the back page of *Blitz*, usually a girl in a bikini but never a nude. India’s obscenity laws are still incredibly prudish and censorship battles still remain to be fought to a conclusion.

A new underground paper, India’s first, has been announced for Bombay, the initial issue hopefully to appear in time for India’s Independence Day on January 26. Edited by a freelance journalist and screenwriter named Jag Mohan, in his late 30s, it will be called *Anti/Pro* and will appear monthly at first. Jag thinks he can find 2,000 domestic subscribers fairly quickly and then will look for foreign distribution. *Anti/Pro* will be offset with color overlays and typeset on one of the handy little Compositor machines rented out by the ubiquitous IBM company.

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