

# MAXIMUM

# CITY

NOAH DAVIS TALKS TO MUMBAI'S  
MASTER CHRONICLER, SUKETU MEHTA,  
ABOUT THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE  
OF THE CITY HE LOVES







**OPEN SKIES:** One of the great successes of *Maximum City* it is that it painted an amazing portrait of a city that is so hard to define. How accurate do you think that portrait still is?

**MEHTA:** A city like Bombay keeps shifting constantly. Rahul Mehrotra, an architect friend of mine who teaches at Harvard and is the most accurate observer of urban Bombay, says that when he goes to Cambridge after six months, basically nothing has changed. If he returns to Bombay in 30 days, the sidewalk outside his office has been torn up and there is a new building in front.

The physical structure changes dramatically and that has been accelerating in the last few years, but I think that the essential contours of the urban forces – especially the political energies, the dynamism of the city, and the different metropolitan stories – are still the same.

**OPEN SKIES:** Is the book popular in Mumbai?

**MEHTA:** It's being pirated widely all across the streets. I take that as a compliment. If these guys – who are extremely selective about what books to publish – will rip me off, then I know I've made it in Bombay.

Once I was in a taxi on my way to the airport and it stopped at a red light. These kids came over with a stack of pirated books and mine was on top. I asked what the book was about. They said, "Oh, all of Bombay is in this book."

I asked how much and then they said, "400 rupees," I said, "400? You know I'm the author of this book." "Fine, if you are the author you can have it for 200." I love the entrepreneurship of these kids, and that still stays the same in the city.

I told my publisher to fire their sales force and just hire these kids because they bring the bookshop to the customer. [Laughs]

**OPEN SKIES:** You talk a lot about the romanticism in the city. The hoppers. The dreamers. Is it still a romantic place for you?

**MEHTA:** It is, but you know, every time I go there people predict the death of Bombay. That never changes. I'm going there this winter and I'm sure the city is at imminent risk of death. [Laughs] Now, of course, there are horrible things about the city. It's very wrong in so many ways. One of the worst is the overdevelopment of the central city. What's been changing now is its growth into the hinterland. I think areas like New Bombay and beyond will go on and be sprawling like Los Angeles.

But there are still shady nooks and alleyways in the city. Whenever I go back I know where to go, like the area around the Gujarati Ghetto in central Bombay, and even many of the lanes of Bandra, which are tree shaded. I look for the relics of that ghost town. Every year when I go back it's a different city from the one it was the previous year. The change is the only constant.

Thirty per cent of the city now is North India, so there is a tremendous pushback against them on the part of Shiv Sena. People used to be against Gujaratis, the communists, the South Indians. Now, it's the North Indians. They have a new bogeyman.

But all these peasants who come in from the north have exactly the same impossible dream that the previous generations did. As long as that's the constant, as long as people still want to come to the city, it will remain vibrant and striving.

**OPEN SKIES:** How possible is upward mobility? What happens to the kid who is selling your book to you for 200 rupees?

**MEHTA:** I've traced a number of people in my book who make it out of the slums and into the tenements. That's the dream: to go from a shack to a structure made of brick. Sometimes they move back to the shack. When they go into the flats, they often find it really anonymous. The slums act like villages in the city.

It baffles because people are still coming. They might not be living on the island city but they might be living in Thane, in New Bombay, in Vashi, in all these new areas that were farmlands 10 years ago.

With the building of the new international airport, I think there is going to be an urban cluster around there. People are still dreaming, and they have more time to dream because the commutes become much longer. When you spend two hours getting to work on the train, there is plenty of time to dream.

**OPEN SKIES:** It sounds like there's plenty of ambition in Mumbai.

**MEHTA:** Bombay has some of the most innovative capitalists I've ever met. It is fundamentally an entrepreneurial city. What matters to the hawker, who is selling his *bhelpuri* on the street, is his little part of the sidewalk. He will fight to the death to protect that little piece of the sidewalk. People respect that. It's the same thing with the multinational executives that come there.

It is a commercial city par excellence, and no other city in India has replaced it. Bangalore hasn't but it's trying. Delhi hasn't. Bombay remains



the most open city in India because it has taken in my ancestors, it's taken in the British, it has taken in the Portuguese. Now it's taking in Beharis and people from UP. These are extremely poor people who are not very well educated, but it still remains open to them. These new people are as entrepreneurial as the people who came before. That's another thing that distinguishes Bombay and gives it its manic energy.

THE CONSTANT  
NEW ARRIVALS  
GIVE THE CITY  
ITS MANIC  
ENERGY

The dream is really to make enough money first to send back to the village and second to get a slightly bigger and better house than the one you have right now. That dream continues all the way to the top. The Ambanis have this mansion, this epic folly that cost a billion dollars. I was in a taxi driven by a man from Bihar and he was driving past this building. I asked him what he thought of it, whether he begrudged the Ambanis for flaunting their wealth. He said, "No, no, it's the law of Bombay. He came here and he built his building, so that's all fine." But the driver did say he didn't like the colour of the house. That was classic. [Laughs] People in Bombay won't mind being ripped off by the politicians or the businessmen because they don't expect anything different but they really have a problem with your colour scheme.

**OPEN SKIES:** Are there economic opportunities for Westerners?

**MEHTA:** Yes. Almost all the Westerners I know prefer Bombay to every other Indian city. It is the most western city in the country and from its beginning it has been an international

city. Westerners in Bangalore can live like they do in an American suburb, but they haven't come to India to live in Minneapolis.

It's much more expensive than Delhi, Bangalore, or any other city, and they know this. But they still keep coming because it has a very vibrant expat scene, and you can walk around, especially compared to Delhi. Western women particularly find Bombay much safer than any other Indian city. They can eat alone in a restaurant without being harassed.

**OPEN SKIES:** This may be an impossible question to answer but is there anything that has surprised you – politically, economically or culturally – that occurred in the city over the past decade?

**MEHTA:** I had thought that there would be some kind of urban explosion, riot, disaster or ethnic conflict in the city by now because the last major riots were in 1992 and 1993. The 2008 bombings on the Taj Mahal were expressly calculated to set off a Hindu-Muslim riot, and it did not happen. That pleasantly surprised me. The

city's local Muslim leaders refused to bury the bodies of terrorists. They said, "These people are not Muslims." The bombings had precisely the opposite effect on the city, actually, as the Hindu leaders and Muslims came together and said, "We are all Bombayites."

It's gratifying to see that the city has matured. There are tensions, but no political party or outside force has been able to exploit them to set ordinary people upon each other. I think it's because of the power of the dream. People want to move there and make enough money to send a little back to the village while keeping body and soul together in the big city. People don't want to sacrifice that dream by assaulting their neighbour.

This is not to say that something won't happen next week or next year because the last riot also really surprised people but, so far, the peace has held. We'll see what happens when India's growth rate goes from nine per cent to six per cent, but I think that the city has learned lessons from the last urban explosion.

**OPEN SKIES:** Were you surprised by the success that *Maximum City* found outside India?

**MEHTA:** Yes, it was very, very surprising to me. I think it happened for a couple of reasons. One is that there was a great deal of interest in India, and in cities in general, around the turn of the century. Bombay is emblematic of a group of cities in the developing world like São Paulo, like Lagos, like Jakarta. Most people don't have a clue about the lives of people in these cities but they want to. There is an epic migration from city to city all around the world. People in New York need to understand the life of someone living in a slum in Bombay, if for no other reason than that the next generation of New Yorkers is being born in a slum in Bombay right now. There are also people who read my book for an explanation of all of India, not just Bombay.

**OPEN SKIES:** I travelled to India last year, and I tried to describe the country when I got back to the United States. I started telling people that any adjective they could think of applies. It is beautiful and corrupt and depressing and amazing and bright and dark and everything all at once.

**MEHTA:** That's a very accurate description of the country and of Bombay. I tried to do that in my book. The city operates at a heightened volume; it's a shouted city. My book has everything. People who can stick out for the torture and riot chapter then get the pleasure sections, ones about Bollywood, and ones about love in the city. Anything you can say about Bombay is true and false simultaneously.

It's a great city. It's a beautiful city by the sea. And yes, it's an ugly city with hellish conditions for people living in there. It has rich and poor. The shock of Bombay is the shock of this juxtaposition. It's all crammed together in such a small space.

Unlike other cities everything in Bombay is public. People are acting out these dramas in public. That's why I call it the Maximum City, because it's the maximum of the urban experience. It is a full taste of what's to come in the world's great cities. One of the things that I am happiest about is that the city seems to have adopted the Maximum City moniker for itself. I had no idea what to call the book until the end and it just sort of







came to me. It's become an unofficial nickname for the city, like the Big Apple, that will outlast me and the book.

**OPEN SKIES:** Do you think Mumbai will continue to mature?

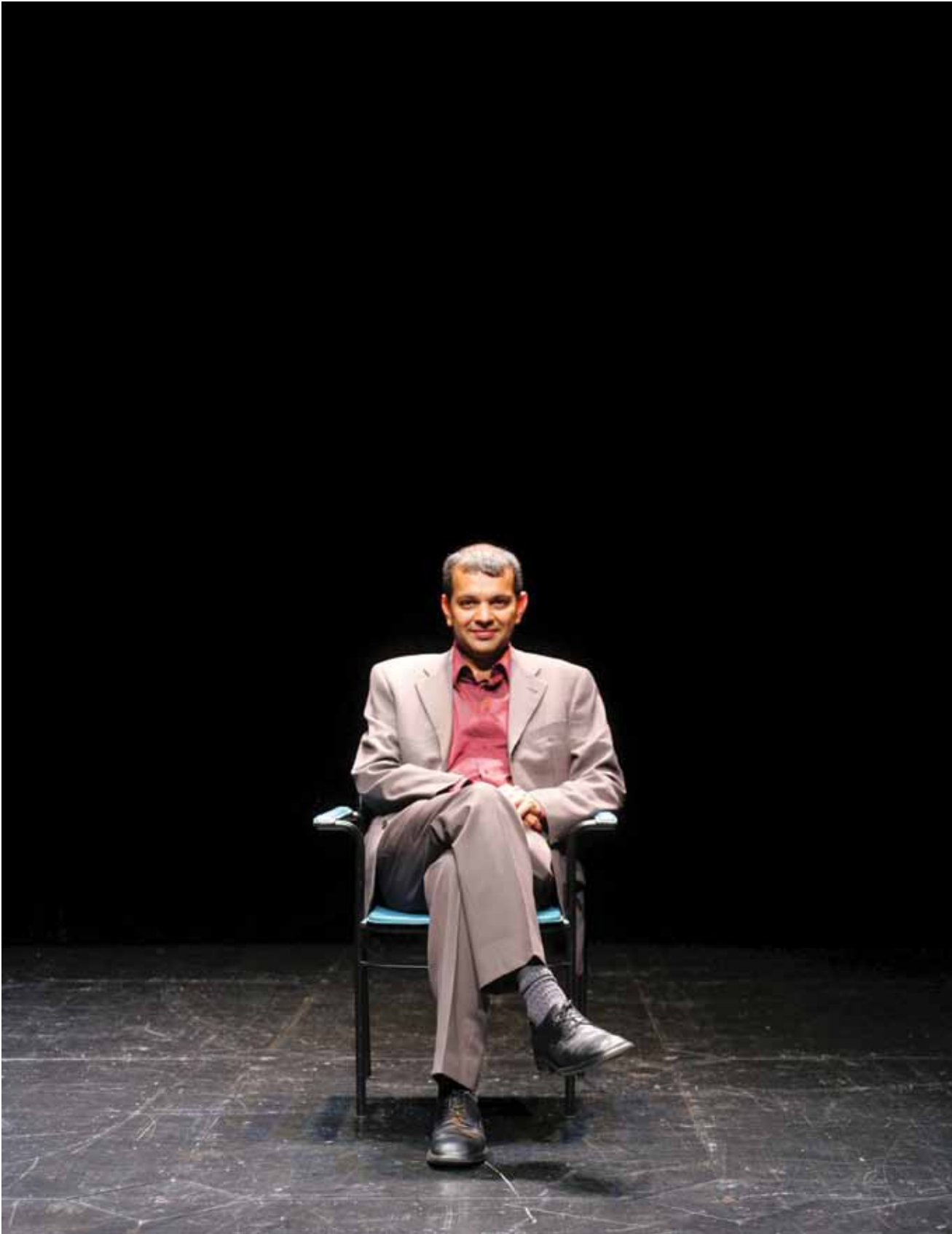
**MEHTA:** There is a huge plot of land on the Eastern Docklands, which could really be instrumental in saving the city or making it a much nicer place to live if it's put to good public use. If it's turned into condo-

## 'MAXIMUM CITY' HAS BECOME A NICKNAME FOR MUMBAI

miniums and luxury hotels, then the city is doomed.

The city desperately needs open spaces, public parks, and schools. It doesn't need any more gated communities or big buildings. The problem with these buildings is that the city lacks the infrastructure, the roads, the subways, the mass transit, and even the electrical and water connections, to serve them. But it's a function of global capital. People who are flying in want to live in such buildings.

It's bringing Miami to Bombay, which I hope can be controlled. I also hope that the city can force the state legislature to make the mayor of Bombay much stronger. The essen-



## MUMBAI IS NOT GOING TO SLOW DOWN AND IT'S NOT GOING TO DIE

tial political problem with Bombay is that it doesn't have a strong mayor. Its fate is determined in the Maharashtra State legislature. It's as if Albany [the capital of New York state] were to have complete authority over New York City. The people in the state legislature, by and large, come from the villages. They don't have a metropolitan sensibility, and they have no allegiance to the city of Bombay even though they live there.

What Bombay needs is a stronger municipality and a stronger mayor. The mayor is just a figurehead. He needs someone who can utilise the tax revenues that the city makes. It's still the economic engine of India.

**OPEN SKIES:** What are some other issues the city faces in the future?

**MEHTA:** The tragedy and the glory of New York and Bombay is that they are both robustly democratic cities where multiple legal petitions will slow down anything you do. But the big problem is misplacement of priorities. Bombay is proudest now of having this giant bridge – the Bandra-Worli Sea Link

– and it does cut down on the traffic through Mahim Bay. But my judgment of projects like this is that these bridges get you to your traffic jam faster. Once you get off the bridge, you basically stop in that same giant traffic jam.

Cities all over the world have realised this: the more roads you build, the more cars will fill them up. Soon, traffic will get even more choked than it was before. Bombay does not need more roads. It needs more mass transit. But roads and bridges are where the money is, and they are a symbol of international development. International consultants can get fat, rich and happy building these giant projects. Meanwhile, basic infrastructure like the fuel system and water gets really sadly neglected because these are not sexy projects. Schools are not sexy. A bridge is sexy. You can show it off. It can be your symbol of the city.

We don't have to repeat the mistakes that other cities have made. By now there's enough of a body of urban planning that we can take lessons from other cities, but unless there is political will, it's not going to happen. And it doesn't seem like that will is there right now.

**OPEN SKIES:** Are you optimistic about the future of Mumbai?

**MEHTA:** Well, whether I am optimistic or pessimistic has no bearing on the future of the city. It will just keep going. One thing I can predict is that it's not going to slow down and it's not going to die. It might be a much worse city to live in. The traffic jams will probably get worse, at least in the short term. It will remain as corrupt as ever and the government will be dysfunctional as ever, but people will still keep coming. There is something about Bombay that is bigger than the shocking state of its physical infrastructure. It's the dream that Bollywood perfectly pre-

sents. If you look at the Bollywood idea of Bombay, it has absolutely no relation to the actual physical Bombay. It's two different cities.

In my book, I write, "Just as cinema is a mass dream of the audience, Bombay is a mass dream of the people from India." People are more comfortable coming to Bombay because they've already lived in it in the dreams they have in tiny villages across the country. They come there and they think that they might be able to bump into a movie star.

A taxi driver in Bombay was telling me about his shack. He had no water or electricity, and he was reminiscing about his village where his whole family would eat delicious foods and work in the green fields.

I said, "That sounds like paradise. What keeps you in Bombay? Is it the money?" He said, "No, no, we have farm land there. We can live well there." "Why do you live in Bombay?" He turned around and said, "You know, last month Lata Mangeshkar was sitting here right where you are sitting."

When he went back to his village and told them that Lata Mangeshkar was in his taxi, they wouldn't believe him. It is as if the one of the goddesses had come down from heaven and was praising this taxi guy. This is an intangible thing: the idea of metropolitan glamour. There is no way for economists to factor it into their equation. What is the monetary value of a dream or of glamour? It is potent enough that the power of it is drawing people all across the country.

I would be really worried if the Bollywood film industry were to move somewhere else. But as long as they stay put in Bombay, the city will be just fine. ■

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