Ports and Digital Ports: The Narrative Construction and Social Imaginaries of the Island City of Mumbai

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Abstract: A city is a physical structure in one sense. In another sense, it is an organic body, poetically and metaphysically portrayed as having a soul. Most urban formations around the world, especially island cities, have a clear anthology of narratives that mesh the physical and the metaphysical of a city-body. The island city of Mumbai possesses characteristic socioeconomic traits have been *counter-intuitively* shaped by narratives and social imaginaries that would not have emerged if not for coastal features and forms. This aspect has been insufficiently explored. This paper will bring three unexplored dimensions to the fore. The first is how this island city's main ports, historically connected to West Asia and later to Europe, become the main entry points for material and non-material foundations of modern cultural production. The second is how these bases became the primary nodes for narratives that inform the city's distinctive ethos and its inhabitants' social imaginaries in such a way as to fundamentally differ from the pre- and postcolonial narratives of India. The third is how digital ports (global undersea Internet cables), initially connected to the city because of the calm waters of the Arabian Sea, have made the Internet a powerful and dominant mode of cultural production in Mumbai.

Keywords: digital ports, globalisation, island cities, Mumbai, social imaginaries, urban archipelagos

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1. Setting the stage

There are two points that the author wishes to explicitly state in advance. First, the author's purpose in highlighting certain narratives and discursive strands in this paper is not to treat them as independent objects of inquiry, but to show how their foundations are linked to the archipelagic nature of the city and its distinct coastal forms. In essence, the author wishes to draw the attention of the urban studies and island studies academic communities to the underexplored role that *imaginaries* play in fundamentally shaping the physical and discursive forms of island cities. Second, the author's mix of approaches from anthropology, cultural studies, media studies, and ethnography is a deliberate attempt to apply a much-needed interdisciplinary lens to urban studies and island studies. The author wishes to place this lens within the context of the *production of spaces*, *space of flows* and *ideoscapes*, concepts pioneered by Henri Lefebvre, Manuel Castells and Arjun Appadurai respectively.

I will refer to the city in question interchangeably as 'Mumbai' and 'Bombay' in order to intuitively indicate the cut-off point of 1995 when Bombay was renamed Mumbai. The same logic is applied in referring to 'Calcutta' and 'Kolkata' and 'Madras' and 'Chennai' respectively.

2. The shape shifter called Mumbai

Mumbai embraced free enterprise at a time when India was enamoured with state-sponsored industrialisation, became the jazz capital of Asia in the 1950s, and had an intricately layered club, pub, public art, theatre, and cinema culture while the rest of India's cultural imaginary remained rooted in a specific 'Indian cultural ethos'. Mumbai's distinct sociocultural construction has been architected by exclusive access to an interlinked set of media and communication technologies facilitated by the city's unique position as a historical port connecting West Asia (through it Europe), Southeast Asia and South Asia. The port was also a node of cultural production distributing material foundations (recording, broadcasting equipment) of mass culture and epistemological frameworks for ideas and cultural forms (jazz LPs from New York) for the city's articulation of its collective self as urban, modern and global. Narratives emerging out of this foundation created the city's relative peripherality to pre- and postcolonial narratives of India, ironically by architecting the city's relative centrality to global conceptualisations of a Western and modern city. The foundations of digital technology (undersea cables, server farms) came first to the city not just because of its coastal location but also due to a thriving narrative of a global, modern, contemporary and Westernised city. This has been a dominant mode of cultural production. Mumbai's unique narrative construction is based on a binary framework of peripherality and centrality, linked to the techno-material and techno-epistemological foundations of sociocultural production.

If Mumbai were a movie, it would be Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, a 1950 Japanese period drama set in feudal Japan. It presents an intriguing tale of violent crime in the woods, told from the perspectives of four different characters – a bandit, a woman, her husband and a woodcutter. Like the arthouse classic, Mumbai's fact and fiction merge, angles and dimensions intermingle, and science and folklore intersect. There are always contradictory interpretations and starkly varying perspectives. This is not to say that the city is unreal. It is real in more ways

than one can imagine, yet the nature of reality is such that one must search for it as one would use a fine eye to pick out a particular strand from a rich tapestry of colours and patterns.

For starters, let us look at some facts, which are more in the nature of strands of reality. Mumbai is a city of extreme contrasts with faultlines running across conventional social divisions of class, caste, religion, gender, income and localities. It is India's wealthiest city, ranks sixth in the world in terms of billionaires and has the highest GDP among the cities of South, West, and Central Asia. Yet various estimates have placed the number of people living in slums in the city between 55% and 70%. With close to 22 million people in the extended metropolitan region of the city, over 1000 communities, sub-communities, religious sects, social groups, regional and sub-regional formations, 16 major languages and 75 minor languages, the city is as diverse as it can get.

No other city has such a multitude of diverse spaces jostling, interacting and engaging with each other. This makes the city richly textured, exploding with flavours, smells and colours. It also makes the city an extremely complicated and complex mix of urban spaces and territories, with unique spatialities and territorialities. Mumbai is a collection of seven islands that the Mughal Empire first granted to the Portuguese in 1534 so that they could establish trading outposts. The Mughal Empire was a Persianate empire extending over large parts of the Indian subcontinent and ruled by a dynasty of Chagatai-Turkic origin. Mumbai's coastal location made it ideal for colonial trading. It changed hands in 1661 when the islands were given to the British Empire as part of the marriage treaty between Charles II of England and Catherine of Braganza, daughter of King John IV of Portugal. As the British colonial enterprise expanded in India, Mumbai turned into an important port. That is when the first wave of migration took place, as per official history. The seven islands were eventually interlinked by bridges and reclamation projects, giving the city its contemporary geographical identity.

Mumbai's seemingly endless possibility to morph itself physically and metaphorically into unique urban forms, its daily multiple realities, are rooted in its specific archipelagic genes. Existing analytical frameworks routinely find it difficult to accommodate these daily arenas of contestations and negotiations in arriving at both a multidimensional academic and a functional understanding of the nuts and bolts of the city. This is even more so in the case of urban studies, which mostly leads to flattened and simplistic explanations of the complex socioeconomic relationships predominantly fuelled by the city's geographical specificities. In short, the current methodological tools and theoretical underpinnings used to understand and position Mumbai give insufficient attention, or credit, to the interconnections between its multiple physical and narrative forms on the one hand and its coastal geography and islandic nature on the other. It is in this context that the emerging field of urban island studies can provide both a fresh conceptual perspective and a functional understanding of Mumbai. As Grydehøj (2015) argues:

> Island city formation and development always occur in place.
> Only by understanding the place specificity of urban space can we understand the rise of island cities, counted among which are some of the most prominent cities in the world. This analysis of city formation and development on small islands highlights the need to consider not just the attributes of places and spaces of abstraction but also specific urban spatialities. Self-agglomerating cities resist borders and benefit from

room to grow, yet [...] nascent cities are nurtured by containment and [...] cities are at their most city-like (densest) when circumscribed by water. The fact that 'the city' is not a "spatially bounded entity" (Amin and Thrift 2002, 8) does not render urban morphology inconsequential. Just as Barrowclough (2010) warns against abstracting islands from mainlands, we must reassert the physical reality of urban place within a globalised and increasingly urbanised world.

Recent decades have seen several fruitful attempts at introducing more qualitative, socio-anthropological and sociocultural approaches into the field of urban studies (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Appadurai, 1986, 2001, 2006; Mayaram, 2012; Brenner, 2014). This has, no doubt, expanded the landscape of urban studies, introducing several new methodological tools and lines of inquiry. Yet urban studies has not been able to shake off the predominant influence of structural approaches that reductively imagine the city and its urban spaces, its numerous urbanisms so to speak, as sociocultural, economic and political specificities of places rather than as a circular historiography of processes inextricably linked to material and physical foundations. This is where the emerging field of island studies is quite decisively cutting through the clutter imposed by structuralism by allowing different notions of an island and islandness to co-exist, interact and interplay with each other, resulting in a transformation of an "island from a noun to a verb" (Baldacchino, 2008). So an island becomes not just a physical coastal feature, which it by all means is, but also a conceptual rubric that accommodates unique physical and narrative constructions of a city's spaces, an interconnected archipelago as also "islands of the mind" (Gillis, 2004). For Baldacchino and Clark (2013), "Once an island is sought, it has already been discovered. There cannot not be an unknown island. Islands are caught in this vortex of being, becoming and much wishful, projected and programmatic thinking." As I have written previously (Swaminathan, 2014):

> Today, though, with the archipelagic nature of the city being reconstituted as a passive commodity, readily moulded and packaged into any global form, the ports have all but vanished from the dominant imaginary, as also from the city's physical and social geography. The ports were unique locales of colonial and post-colonial contestations. They were sites of nationalist mutinies, important cauldrons of class struggle and emergent forms of social engineering.

Anyone seeking to develop fresh insight into the intricate character of Mumbai, quite possibly the ultimate shape shifter of a city, may well benefit from the intermingling of new conceptual methodologies, analytical frameworks and metaphorical imaginaries that a certain section of urban studies and large portions of island studies are deploying and using on an increasing basis. Using this unique mix helps bring into sharp focus landscapes and mindscapes, in our case ports and digital ports, which are predominantly shaped and moulded by the geographical characteristics that are specific to islands and archipelagos (Grydehøj *et al.*, 2015).

3. The academic straitjacket
The academic world has been seeking to grapple with the complexities of Mumbai for close to seven decades, trying to put it all within neat conceptual and theoretical baskets. The success and failure of such attempts is still under debate and is as much a matter of perspective as of objective analysis, much like the city itself. Historical and contemporary academic focus on Mumbai has broadly consolidated around a set of five binaries of colonial-postcolonial,

nationalist-internationalist, local-global, cultural-economic and migration-identity (Haynes & Rao, 2013: 317-335; Parthasarathy, 2011; Patel, 2009; Pendse, 1995; Phadke, 2007; Prakash, 2006; Punjwani, 1984; Singh (mimeo), 2005). All five sets have dealt with questions of modernity, urbanity, secularism, religion, urbanism and city life as well as continuing linkages to rural landscapes and imaginaries. A majority of the scholarly work on Mumbai's urbanity across the disciplines of sociology, political science, urban geography and history focuses on the 'long nineteenth century' (Kidambi, 2013: 561–80), a flexible chronological scale that lasts from the establishment of the first European outpost in Bombay in the late-16th Century to the end of the 1930s (Dobbin, 1972; Masselos, 1974; Bayly, 1983; Dossal, 1991). Much of the literature also focuses on quantitative models of town planning and increasing spatial spread of urban sprawls, broadly referred to as development discourse, or on narratives of migration, interaction of diversities, identity, and assimilation (Hansen, 2001; Patel, 2003), all falling within the broad parameters of urban ethnography and social anthropology.

All of these analytical frames, especially the lens of postcolonial studies, use modernity, urbanity, secularism and notions of the global city. These are complex concepts that trace their epistemological roots directly to the historical specificity of 16th and 17th Century Western Europe. These concepts are seen as modular pieces that can be fitted into any context, independent of time and space. Such reductionism leads to interpretations and analyses of unique urban experiences as *non-conformal* and hence constitutive of in-between spaces. It also positions excavated subaltern narratives as cultural sites of contestation that fundamentally negate notions of modernity, urbanity and secularism. Such sites are then seen as islands of *nonurbanism* that, ironically, further strengthen specific notions of modernity and global city as a modular urban framework. In all of these approaches, however, the archipelagic nature of the city as an entry point for research to understand the unique configurations of urbanity and urban imaginaries is either marginalised or completely ignored. Even when it is acknowledged, it is located within the context of the city's colonial experience where "the physical form of the city invites reflection on its colonial origin […] in fact, the Island City occupies land stolen from the sea […] and it bears the marks of its colonial birth and development" (Prakash, 2010: 26-27).

4. Trying to fit

Every city has its unique set of material, non-material and epistemological foundations: the pillars of urbanity so to speak. Every city also has a local, regional, national and transnational context. Mumbai is no different. The existing methodological frameworks being used to analyse Mumbai must be located within the larger context of urban studies within India, which identify three forms of urbanism-modernism at work: colonial (Lutyen's Delhi is the high point of such a discourse), nationalist (Le Corbusier's Chandigarh was the original object of study while the cities of Gandhinagar and Bhubaneswar are contemporary focus areas), and global(encompassing micro- and meta-narratives of urban renewal, refurbishment, technological upgrades, smart spaces, hybridised technoscapes and "any transformation of cityscapes and city use patterns" (Chalana, 2010: 25-37) foundationally underpinned by larger processes of globalisation and shared urbanisms). Each of these frameworks manages to capture vignettes of the city in granular detail. But a vignette is like a photograph: It captures the moment and sometimes even its story, yet when all said and done, it is just a slice of a multivocal city, always prone to fossilisation and ossification.

There are critical differences between European and Asian island cities. The fundamental imperatives of European island cities were architected by a desire to be physically and geographically secure through the construction of defensive structures. In fact islands were seen as strategically defendable and manageable units, a crucial and critical ingredient for notions of sovereignty and political control. This in turn allowed European islands to extend their spatiality and territoriality, even their specific archipelagic logic, to other geographical and physical places, many of them not really islands in the conventional sense. The specificities of a European conceptualisation of the island city fundamentally determined the nature, scale and scope of socioeconomic activities, cultural forms and articulations and political and power frameworks:

> The islandness of cities like Amsterdam, Paris, and Copenhagen is not incidental. Historically, forces of organised authority have selected small islands as sites on which to centre their power because small islands facilitate the maintenance of territoriality for purposes of trade with or political control over a wider area. That is, the ideal of the city (defended against incursion yet capable of projecting power out beyond the urban core) dovetails with the attributes of the small island (spatially distinct, easily defensible, and with access to waterborne transport). Where small islands did not exist from the start, they were often created: Brussels, Gdansk, Geneva, Groningen, Nicosia, Valletta, Vienna, and countless other European population centres were systematically walled and islanded in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Even where small islands already existed, as we have seen, further more-or-less circular islands were constructed around them (Pigou-Dennis & Grydehøj, 2014: 260).

Most of the Asian island cities, on the other hand, were fundamentally shaped by their colonial experience. Some such experiences were benign and others extremely exploitative. The overarching philosophy of the European colonial powers was to replicate the island city dynamics of their hemisphere into the Asian archipelagic centres. There was, however, a major departure. The notions of centrality and peripherality, organically evolved in the European context, were artificially defined in an *a priori* manner to fit the framework of global colonial trade. So while railway infrastructure and ports, for instance, developed both in European island cities and Asian island cities, the manner of their development, the nature of their deployment and the eventual impact on the spatial, territorial, architectural and demographic spread and the consequent narrative and metaphorical construction of the city were radically different.

The city is also a problematic. There are two deep-rooted sets of issues with the current scholarly and academic approaches towards studying the city. The first one lies in the manner in which the dominant theoretical frameworks of study – modernity, urbanity, colonialism, postcolonial cityscapes or technosocial global cities – are used as one-size-fits-all structural scaffolding, despite their Eurocentric origins and historical specificity. This creates unintentional hierarchy, and a widening gap, between theory and the organically produced multivocal and intersected narratives of the city. The conventional approaches, by default, first position the theoretical rubric and then try to fit the city's experiences within it as one would the piece of a puzzle. The second set deals with the marginalisation of the city's archipelagic roots and its coastal genes in the creation of the city's stories: the manner in which the organic narratives of indigenous communities have been subsumed by dominant storylines is a distinct case in point. What is even more startling is the complete absence of any serious scholarship even

acknowledging, let alone studying and analysing, the archipelagic, coastal and littoral nature of the city as valid material and non-material foundations for the territorial, spatial, cultural and the technological construction of the city. An archipelagic lens is flexible enough to become an organic frame of reference as well as a theoretical structure for analysing the city. It is also robust enough to integrate itself with dominant theoretical frameworks; in fact, the lens has the potential to bring a much-needed sociocultural context and organic flexibility to the existing approaches of urban studies. It is within this context that two of the most deeply entrenched archipelagic forms – ports and digital ports – are being used as material and non-material entry points to excavate a fresh insight into the narrative construction of Mumbai.

5. Ports: Reconstituting the city's DNA

There are two major ports in Mumbai today. The dripping-in-history Mumbai Port (formerly, Bombay Port) has seen the likes of the Maratha, Portuguese and British navies; anti-colonial resistance and struggle; and myriad class and caste contestations. It is now home to several of India's most advanced warships and still logs in as one of India's busiest ports. Bombay Port is a natural deep-water harbour spread over 400 km² and protected by the mainland of Konkan to its east and north and by the island city of Mumbai to its west. Mumbai Port is primarily used for bulk cargo, while most container traffic is directed to the second major port, Jawaharlal Nehru Port, better known as Nhava Sheva Port, across the water, which is fast becoming a favoured destination for exporters and importers. It is the largest container port in India. Located south of Mumbai, this port on the Arabian Sea is accessed via Thane Creek. Its name is derived from the names of the Nhava and Sheva villages that were situated here. Mumbai's ports and jetties have been the lifeline of the city, pumping in goods and technologies, ideas and cultures, people and communities and multihued stories and narratives. They have also physically and territorially shaped the city, sometimes in a direct and visible manner, and often in an unobtrusive way, almost like how the sea shapes the coast.

Less than 600 years ago, neither Mumbai nor its previous avatar Bombay existed as a city. It was just a collection of seven islands and several islets used by the local Koli fishing community as an outpost and resting point. The global city emerged quickly out of a motley collection of geographical features, with its own nuanced sense of history and complex patterns of intersected narratives. Six hundred years is not even a passing moment in urban historiography. In that fleeting moment, seven disparate islands and several islets were connected with each other through a mixture of reclamation of land from the sea and a rapid expansion of rail and road networks. There were colonial imperatives of trade and transport of raw materials to Europe behind this process. But those imperatives were fuelled by the unique archipelagic nature of Mumbai, especially its coastal location, the availability of several natural ports and a unique melting pot of different global cultures and influences from Central Asia, West Asia and Europe. In the words of Grydehøj (2014: 183), "Island spatiality exerts developmental influence in urban contexts not just historically but also in terms of development and redevelopment of cities and neighbourhoods today, even in the presence of bridges, ferries, trains, and buses."

Asian colonial cities are typically seen as enterprises of a dominant external power, usually European, crafting an undistinguished mass of land into distinct cityscapes and urban spaces that are reminiscent and reflective of the hegemonic aspirations and articulations of

the colonial power (King, 1991, 2007). Bombay, as it was then known, was different, as were the other Indian colonial cities of Calcutta (now Kolkata) and Madras (now Chennai). All of them had strong and deeply rooted indigenous mercantile and trading communities. The Marwaris of Calcutta (Parson, 2012) and the Chettiars of Madras, for instance, routinely funded the East India Company's military and business forays into the hinterland of India. In Bombay, the Indian capitalist class pushed as much for the construction of the port as did the East India Company and the British administrators:

> On 5 March 1839, five prominent native businessmen of Bombay proposed a scheme to the government that would cost over two hundred thousand rupees, a huge sum in those days. The scheme consisted of the building of a wharf and basin at the Cooly Bunder (dock) for the landing of grain, and the extension of this wharf as far as the Bori Bunder for the landing of cotton or any other merchandise. In their letter the merchants added, "We doubt not that considering the importance of the undertaking to the interest of a large portion of the community; and the expense that will be involved in the completion of it, upwards of two lacs of Rupees – as also the improvement it will confer upon the island of Bombay – an improvement the furtherence of which we have always understood it to be a particular object of attention to the Government of this Presidency to have effected through private enterprise…" In other words, business leaders understood that the colonial government believed that private enterprise would play an integral role in the development of the city (Chopra, 2011: 320).

Bombay Port was also instrumental in directly influencing the development of the suburban railway network. It is today Mumbai's most important arterial overlay, a system that not only transports people and commodities but entire lifeworlds, narratives and dominant and countercultural discourses. A single railway line was laid down in 1853 between Bori Bunder, where a large wharf was constructed for the loading and unloading of big containers and high volume bundles, and Thane, a strategic point around 33 kilometres away, with access to the Western Indian hinterland, especially the black soil rich Deccan Plateau, known for its high-quality cotton crops. That single line, an artery if one will, soon branched into a tightly patterned criss-cross of nerves and veins with its own hubs, transforming into what contemporary Mumbaikars know as the Central, Western and the Harbour railway lines. The urban development of Mumbai, especially its territorial contouring, has been fundamentally shaped by these railway networks:

> The first passenger railway in the east (in Asia) ran between 21 miles of Bombay and Thane stations on 16 April, 1853, laid by the Great Indian Peninsula Railway (GIPR) that was originally set up under the Parliament of England Act. Citizens of Bombay celebrated the day as a public holiday. The same 'experimental line' of the GIPR is today the lifeline of suburban Bombay, now called Mumbai, India's financial capital, ferrying a record 3m suburban passengers every single day. It is called the Central Railway today. As the line even today runs on the same old blueprint. (A snippet of a personal conversation with journalist and rail historian Rajendra Aklekar, conducted on 24 July 2014, where he quotes from his forthcoming book *Halt Station India*, to be published by Rupa).

The extension of the rail network was also influenced by the supply of cotton, as several textile mills were established in the central part of Bombay, leading to a massive influx of people from the Indian hinterland to work in them. It also led to a massive expansion of the rail

network across the Western Ghats, creating a narrative of work and commonality, resulting in a nascent national Indian identity:

> For the construction of the Bhor Ghat section, which is now known as the Khandala railway line between Mumbai and Pune, workers came from all castes and communities, from near and far, to work as per their expertise. The breaking of the barrier of the Sayhadri mountain range was an important milestone (A snippet of a conversation that the oldest living historian on Indian Railways, Ian J. Kerr, has with 90-year-old veteran Indian railways expert R. Venkataraman; *cf.* Aklekar, 2014).

The development of the city into a textile centre led to two specific distinctions. The first distinction was to clearly demarcate the colonial part of Bombay (now known as South Mumbai) from its native parts, a demarcation that is visible to this day where South Mumbai's dominant imaginary is architected by its colonial architecture (Art Deco, Victorian, Gothic, Indo-Saracenic), cultural formations (clubs) and narratives of Eurocentrism (English education, definition of high society culture), while the native parts comprising Mazgaon Docks, Byculla, various Khau Gallis and small trading hubs like Charni Road are positioned as sociocultural emergences of nativity and the city's spirit of indigenous entrepreneurship.

The second distinction was to territorially and physically contour the development of the city's suburban areas into western and eastern parts, on either side of the railway lines, through a mix of colonial town planning, administrative zoning and influx of population. The western parts of the city housed the emerging managerial elite and the petty bourgeoisie, while the eastern parts were predominantly populated by the working class. It was a clear class demarcation, even if it was not spoken of in those terms. This distinction was also manifested in differential provision of civic infrastructure: For instance, open spaces and gardens are invariably more numerous and better provided for in the western parts of the city. Similarly, there are visible differences in levels of citizen participation in structures of governance. There are also distinctions in the forms of informal cultural articulations and notions of work. Together they created distinct physical structures, for example chawls, that led to unique metaphorical narratives and a unique sense of meaning of the daily lifeworlds of the city. They also created several gendered discourses that have allowed women to become an integral part of the mainstream economic activities. The life of chawls has been used extensively in popular culture to create an imaginary of a diverse multitude united by the cooperative get-it-done ethos of the city:

> The building form of the chawls contributes substantially to the close-knit social life that the residents lead. The combination of all common areas like courtyards, corridors, staircases and so on provide ample scope for social interaction in these cohesive chawl communities. This social network is the support system of the residents and needs to be maintained. This dense social network is one of the main reasons why the residents have not moved out of the chawls. This building form provides an example of successful affordable community housing in urban areas of Mumbai for the middle class (Karandikar (mimeo), 2010: 3-4).

Some aspects of this distinction continue to this day. It is not evident in the profile of the people or cultural landscapes, especially in the context of an overarching global city culture. It is, however, stark in the rental and capital values of commercial and residential property. Such values in the eastern parts of Bandra, for instance, are at least 30% lower than in the

western parts of Bandra. Bombay Port was also an instrumental point of entry and exit for non-material and epistemological foundations of modernity and urbanity. The narratives surrounding the Bombay Presidency Radio Club and the Royal Bombay Yacht Club, both established near the Gateway of India, a colonial monument celebrating the city's archipelagic nature as much as British triumphalism, are indicative of this transformation. The radio club was established in 1932 and was one of the first meeting grounds for technophiles of that era. The first programmed radio broadcast in India was made from the club, and until 1927 it was the country's only radio station The Royal Bombay Yacht Club (RBYC) was founded in 1846 and is the oldest yachting club in Asia:

> The Radio Club was a meeting ground for technologically astute Indians and, of course, the British expatriates who ran the colonial administration of Bombay. It was established next to the Gateway of India because the club wanted itself to be seen as representing a Bombay that was on par with European capitals of London and Paris. It was a time of exploration, new ideas, and scientific discoveries and advances. It was also a time when rules of nature did not seem to apply. Voices could travel distances, trains were cutting down time and art deco houses were redefining urban living. Establishing the radio club near the Gateway of India was also a practical decision. The club's activities depended on the availability of radio channels for hamming (*sic*). The Gateway of India was also symbolic of Britain's naval presence and was near the British naval bases. This allowed the members access to clear and powerful signals. They would spend hours tuning to distant stations, listening to the latest news, radio dramas and music (Excerpt froma personal interview with 71-year-old advocate Mohan P. Mirchandani, three-time president of the radio club, on 03 March 2013.).

> The history of the Royal Bombay Yacht club is fascinating. It is the oldest yachting club in Asia and was established to give British naval and military personal an opportunity to indulge in the leisurely activity of sailing and yachting. The club was also quintessentially European, with its own culture of old boys' network, continental bars, reading rooms and butler service. The philosophy of sailing is one of leisure, conquest, discovery and a spirit of adventure. These are attributes that one commonly associates with refined, modern and civilised living. The local Kolis were employed by the Club, as they are today, and they know the sea like the back of their hand. Yet many of them can never understand how sailing could be an activity of leisure. For them the sea is life; it gives them food and is a divine gift. They have their own set of dos and don'ts. When I first embarked on my trip to circumnavigate the world my Koli sailing mate gave me charms and bracelets to grace me with divine protection of the sea gods (Excerpt from a personal interview with 74-year-old Gulshan Rai, president of the Royal Bombay Yacht Club (RYBC), on 07 August 2011. Rai has been awarded two of India's highest civilian awards, the Padmashree, and Arjuna awards, and circumnavigated the globe in the 32-foot cutter Jaykus II).

Both conversations highlight the subtle means by which a non-Western archipelago narrative is increasingly intersected by Eurocentric conceptions of modernity and urbanity, informing daily imaginaries of leisure, adventure, exploration and conquest (Swaminathan, 2014). Alongside Kolkata and Madras, Bombay was among the Indian cities in which Long Playing (LP) records and moving pictures (our present-day movies and films) made an early

entry due to the presence of a port. In fact, the narrative and discursive transformation of Bombay into a city of dreams, of paths paved with gold and of a land of a million opportunities, was primarily architected by the creative industries and can be directly traced to the easy import of cinematic and audiovisual equipment. The Hindi film industry, popularly called Bollywood, is today worth US$5 billion annually (FICCI-KPMG Entertainment Report, 2014).

There is a fascinating side story of how Calcutta, which had its own port and wharfs and was exposed quite early to audiovisual equipment, lost the race to become India's dominant film centre to Bombay, while Madras become an independent centre of its own. One of the pioneers of Indian silent films was Calcutta-based businessman and moving pictures aficionado Hiralal Sen. In several ways his work mirrored the development of cinema in Europe. He was often ahead of the curve in comparison to Bombay. By October 1917, due to massive speculative losses in commodity trading during World War I, Hiralal Sen was sick and bankrupt. It was then he received the devastating news that his brother's warehouse, where he had stored all his work and the entire stock of the Royal Bioscope Company, was on fire. One can only speculate, but he died just a few days after receiving the shocking news. Hiralal's death and the devastation of his company drove all of the talent and technical expertise to Bombay. This is one of the reasons why some of the biggest Bollywood legends of the early times – from directors, actors to technicians – were Bengalis or were from Kolkata:

> Movies first came to Mumbai on 7 July 1896. The Lumière brothers sent a man named Marius Sestier to screen their short films to a mostly British audience at the swanky Watson hotel. [...] Local photographer Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatavdekar (popularly known as Save Dada) was at one of those first Mumbai shows – and he was promptly moved to order a camera of his own from the UK. Bhatavdekar's first movie, and the first by an Indian film-maker, was shot in 1899 – he captured a wrestling match in Mumbai's Hanging Gardens. The reel had to be shipped back to the UK for processing, but Bhatavdekar's career in the motion-picture business, and Indian film production itself, had begun. By the time *The Wrestlers* returned to Mumbai ready for exhibition, he had bought a projector and was screening foreign-made films. He supplemented his imports with the films he made himself. When maths scholar RP Paranjpe returned to India from Cambridge, Bhatavdekar captured the moment – and this may well be the first Indian news footage. Bhatavdekar continued to make films until the mid-1900s, when he made a sideways move and bought the Gaiety Theatre in Mumbai – which he ran successfully, and lucratively, until his death (Hutchinson, 2013).

The postcolonial imperatives of the city were different. They revolved around the development of Mumbai and its hinterland into an industrial and pharmaceutical hub and a decongestion of the city's colonial-era housing and business centres. One can directly trace the development of the western suburbs (from Bandra to Borivili) and the eastern suburbs (from Bhandup to Vikhroli and Chembur, Wadala to Trombay) to these twin imperatives. Interestingly, the western suburbs in daily narratives of sense and meaning of urban complexities are often called 'sea view localities' and the eastern suburbs referred to as 'harbour fronts' (Swaminathan, 2014). The ports played an important role in hard-nosed business decisions to establish certain industries. Bombay Port was, in more ways than one, a competitive advantage for certain kinds of manufacturing industries, and this led to an overarching paradigm of development and progress based on private enterprise and free markets that was radically

different from the post-independence Indian state's vision for development that was based on state-led industrialisation, regulation and licenses:

> Walchand Hirachand Doshi established India's first modern shipyard, first aircraft factory and first car factory besides setting up construction companies, sugar plantation, sugar factory, confectionery, engineering companies and other businesses. He established the Premier Car factory in Kurla (a suburb in Bombay around 15 kilometres from Bori Bunder) because Fiat Italy said they would ship the parts only to Bombay. His initial plan was to set up the factory in Kolkata because of better skilled labour force there. For Fiat shipping to Bombay worked out cheaper. The same was the case with Mohammed & Mahindra (later on Mahindra & Mahindra) which was manufacturing tractors and jeeps at Kandivli (another suburb around 20 kilometres from Bori Bunder). Several industries like chemical factories, pharmaceutical companies and paint companies […] all of them established industries in and around Bombay because the port provided a clear competitive advantage. Do you know that Bombay is a leader in anti-corrosion and water proofing paints because it is constantly buffeted by sea winds and rain and the demand here is the greatest? The port created a liberal market economy in Bombay and this led the Indian industrialists support the Indian independence movement […] In fact the Bombay Plan [the World War II-era *A Brief Memorandum Outlining a Plan of Economic Development for India* giving proposals for the development of post-independence India, submitted by leading Indian industrialists] came up because the people like my great grandfather and other industrialists wanted to protect the unique economy of Bombay (Snippet from a personal conversation with 35-year-old Chirag Doshi, great-grandson of Walchand Hirachand, conducted on 24 September 2014. Doshi today runs two extremely successful nightclubs and restaurants in Mumbai.).

Ports have directly and indirectly contoured and shaped the city of Mumbai in many ways; indeed they are shaping it even as we read this by continuously transmitting and transporting not just goods, but entire worldviews. Ports are also a direct reflection of the city's archipelagic nature: a physical portal loaded with possibilities and influences that can fundamentally and definitively shape a city.

6. Injecting a digital logic into the city's genes
Popular narratives of India's stupendous information technology growth automatically begin at Bangalore, a leading global hub of software algorithms, cutting-edge financial services solutions and information technology companies. Today Bangalore is without doubt India's software engine. But India's first computer company was established in Bombay. As a matter of fact, until the 1980s, Bombay was India's leading computer hardware and software market. The initial ecosystem for setting up computer companies came from the electronics hardware market that was created due to the import and illegal smuggling of electronics goods from East Asia by the sea route. Mumbai's underworld was internationalised and globalised by this illegal sea trade in electronics, which later expanded to include West Asian gold, drugs from Thailand and Indo-Burma and then weapons from international arms markets in Afghanistan and Pakistan. By many accounts Mastan Haider Mirza, popularly known as Haji Mastan, was the city's first underworld don. He became a major crime figure after becoming partners with another crime lord Sukur Narayan Bakhi. They started smuggling electronics

goods from East Asia, especially Japan and Hong Kong, and gold from West Asia and divided territories among themselves. Mastan handled Mumbai Port and Bakhia handled Daman Port. The booming legal and illegal trade in electronics, with Bombay literally and figuratively becoming the first port of call for the extremely popular Phillips radio, Panasonic tape recorders, and Sony Walkmans, created an electronics components, repair and refurbishment market that produced a natural ecosystem for the adoption of computers and calculating machines:

> The IT journey of India started in 1965. I take some credit for this. I had returned to India (*Bombay*) in mid-1965 on a summer vacation, after having completed my MBA from MIT. I spoke to Mr. H. Ramnath Rao, my neighbor, who was then the Marketing Manager of Tata Fison. He suggested I meet Professor Rustom Choksi, a Director at Tatas and headed HR at the Group level. Professor Choksi sent me to meet Mr. P. M. Agerwala, then Managing Director of Tata Electric Companies, an Electrical Engineer from Rourkee. I narrated my background to Mr. Agerwala. I had taught Statistical Decision Theory while doing my MBA. Mr. Agerwala said "Why don't you join? Look around you and write-up some papers on what we can do related to computers". At that time computers were virtually unknown in India. I thus became an employee of the Tata Electric Companies. The first project was the automation of the Load Despatch System, which was done by buying computer time at Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), which had a CDC 3600 at that time. A year thereafter in 1968, this enterprise was taken over by Tata Sons and renamed as Tata Consultancy Services. It started by leasing two IBM 1401 computers from IBM which were installed at Nirmal Building, the first high rise building at Nariman Point. We recruited a large number of qualified and competent professionals. There were around 20 PhDs at the start itself which gave a tremendous impetus to this enterprise (Kanodia, 2012).

Some of earliest institutions to use computers were research institutions, namely the Bhaba Atomic Energy Research Centre (BARC) (BARC), Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR). Historically, however, the first two companies to set up what is currently known as software services were Hinditron, which was founded by Hemant Sonawala in 1966; Datamatics, HCL, started by Shiv Nadar and Arjun Malhotra; and Patni computers. Except for HCL, all of the other companies were located in Bombay. India's most prominent Information Technology mascots – Narayana Murthy and Nandan Nilekani – learned the ropes at Patni in Bombay. There is a larger context behind how Bombay became the first choice as the peering destination for the international fibre optic network. In the 1970s, the Professor MGK Menon Committee, a select group of policy makers tasked with suggesting a technology path for India, recommended that India start developing a computer industry. The initial focus was to set up indigenous chip design and fabrication facilities, but this proved difficult. All of the Indian companies, from TCS to Wipro, which were looking to develop indigenous capacities in hardware manufacturing, slowly shifted focus to software programming. In 1991 the Government of India sought to leverage the programming boom taking place in the United States, and one single decision gave rise to the outsourcing revolution:

> In 1991 the Department of Electronics created a corporation called Software Technology Parks of India (STPI) that, being owned by the government, could provide VSAT communications without breaching its monopoly. STPI set up software technology parks in different cities, each of which provided satellite links to be used

> by firms; the local link was a wireless radio link. In 1993 the government began to allow individual companies their own dedicated links, which allowed work done in India to be transmitted abroad directly. Indian firms soon convinced their American customers that a satellite link was as reliable as a team of programmers working in the clients' office (Adugu *et al.*, 2003).

Bombay's coastal location and its strong port infrastructure were the primary considerations for making the city the peering point for the undersea international fibre optic network, which is the backbone of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW). To a lesser extent, the city's formal and informal electronics market and its existing ecosystem of computer companies also played a part. Internet, in the public sense of the term, officially arrived in India in 1991 when a set of last-mile fibre optic cables were taken to the Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL) technical office, already strategically located within five kilometres of Bombay Port. VSNL introduced Gateway Electronic Mail Service in 1991, a 64 kbit/s leased line service in 1992, and commercial Internet access on a visible scale in 1992. It is next to impossible to explain the material, territorial and non-material implications of the introduction of Internet and World Wide Web for a city like Mumbai without resorting to anecdotes, especially from the movies, as this snippet from a conversation with 49-year-old Zaki Ansari reveals:

> I am a diploma in automobile engineering and was working in the Mahindra & Mahindra tractor factory as a tooling and machining engineer and freelancing for newspaper Mid-Day on electronics repair queries when I heard about Internet. There were no cybercafés then, but VSNL had a very expensive plan where you could buy a modem and attach it to your telephone line and access the Internet. From my childhood I was always fiddling around with radios, transistors and tape recorders. I had just assembled a computer on my own using locally sourced parts. I connected it to the Internet. It just opened a new world for me. I was like Dr. Banner after being exposed to Gamma radiation! I felt so powerful. Soon I was devouring everything. I heard that a top advertising guru was thinking of setting up the first Indian news portal, and I got in touch with him. That's how rediff.com started in 1994 in a small two-bedroom house in Kemps corner. Over 15 years I rose to become the CTO of the company. Bombay's Internet created India's first batch of self-taught digital professionals (Personal conversation with Zaki Ansari, a former colleague at rediff.com for close to four years, conducted on 06 July 2014).

Mumbai's exposure to digital pipelines – and what they carried and could potentially carry – created a fresh landscape for a host of creative industries, especially advertising, digital photography, social media management and short films. Most of the people involved, the city's knowledge bank, including people like Zaki Ansari, were self-taught pioneers who experimented again and again, sometimes succeeding and often failing. This spirit of entrepreneurial ownership can justifiably be traced back to the physical ports that amplified and accentuated the spirit of trading and market dynamics in the city (*cf.* Khoo *et al.* 2015). In explaining the 'creative edge' of the city of Mumbai while recounting her popular social media campaign to clean the city's Mithi River, 30-year-old Mahafreed Irani, who calls herself a "digital warrior and a Twitter tiger," reveals the various digital strands that today constitute the complex narrative articulation of Mumbai:

> I never forget my phone (*iPhone*) when I go out. I would feel lost without it. One day I was asked to do a story on the leather artisans and *khumhars* (potters) of the Dharavi slums. When I went there I saw that several of the houses were just next to Mithi and they were using its waters for everything […] from cleaning utensils, morning ablutions, washing clothes. I also found that several small home factories dealing with chromium and heavy metals used for tanning leather were directly dumping their untreated effluents into the river. I started taking pictures and uploading them on my blog. After a few days, I shot videos, did multimedia presentations […]Soon other friends and people from social media joined. Some were architects, other engineers and they started mapping locations and using a lot of Google maps. They also started posting historical data and satellite maps using the Google historical maps feature. It became big and my newspaper picked it up and we ran a campaign for a year (Excerpts from personal interviews conducted with Mahafreed Irani, July 2013-April 2014).

The emergent dynamics of the digitally mediated spaces in Mumbai are powered by a unique combination of physical infrastructure of electronic components, servers, telecommunication lines and embedded intelligent logic of codes, algorithms and predictive software. Taken together, they constitute the material support for these spaces: In fact, the spatiality and territoriality of such spaces of can be directly traced to the archipelagic nature of the city, especially its coastal emergences. So the spatial form of a digitally mediated space could equally be a 'city' one moment and a 'global region' the next. This architects a unique relationship of *quantum mutation* where space and spatiality seamlessly interchange, co-exist and merge. Such entanglements create shared experiences that are virtual and real, as this conversation with Sunil Dalvi indicates:

> I love European football and follow it very closely on Internet and television. I don't miss any matches of Bundesliga, English Premier League and La Liga. My favourite teams are Bayern Munich, Barcelona and Manchester United. We have a small football team in the neighbourhood. We don't have a park to play, so we play on the roads. I love the shoes and the kit the players wear. All these teams play in such nice stadiums and I really love watching those snippets where they do a quick tour of the city. It's so neat, nice and clean. The roads are broad and everyone seems so modern. I have never been to a football stadium. There are no football stadiums in Mumbai. There are only cricket stadiums. One day I hope Mumbai also becomes like those cities with clean, wide roads and football stadiums (Snippet from a conversation with 25-year-old Sunil Dalvi. He has never been to Kolkata, which is considered India's football capital, yet has acquired the nuances of football and a global logic of what should constitute a totality of urban experience. A similar *imaginary* was shared by Zubin Mehrotra, who is a banker educated in the United Kingdom and works with a multinational finance company in Mumbai).

The narratives of Zaki Ansari, Mahafreed Irani, and Sunil Dalvi are indicative of how a digital logic and its specific systems of transmission, projection and mindscaping is creating a certain discursive singularity of urban life and living, drawing as much from the global dynamics of power as much from local context. Such intermeshing is architecting a hybridised system where cultural values and material foundations are not necessarily rooted in any specific territorial or physical context. If Mahafreed's drive to clean the Mithi River is powered by Seoul's successful cleaning up of the Cheonggycheon, a material foundation mainly

transported through digital pipelines, then Zaki's notion of empowerment and sense of opportunity is something than can be traced to the physical ports of Mumbai and their amplification of the spirit of entrepreneurship over the last two centuries. Cheonggyecheon is a public recreation space in downtown Seoul in South Korea. But less than two decades back, it was little more than an open drain. The massive urban renewal project, worth US $900 million, initially attracted much public criticism but after opening in 2005, it has become popular among city residents and tourists. Sunil's global aspirations have no local material foundations, but the complex sociocultural imaginary of a 'neat, global city' in itself becomes a powerful substitute. Mumbai, in a sense, shares a distinct commonality – itself an oxymoron – with several other island cities of the world:

> In the case of densely urbanised small islands, island status can also be of both historical and continuing importance. Thus, for instance, Macau became a Portuguese trading post because it was an archipelago near an economically organized mainland interior. However, the acute land scarcity arising from its island status contributed – and still contributes – to intensive urban densification and land reclamation processes. Miniscule Macau is an extreme example, but in megacities like Guangzhou, Manila, Mumbai, and Tokyo, the urban challenges brought about by island spatiality are, in a sense, scaled up in light of such cities' enormous populations (Grydehøj, 2014).

7. Answers and some more questions

The case for reorienting the scholarly and academic approaches towards an independent archipelagic framework and lens to study the city of Mumbai is now quite well established. The Mumbai of today is a complex collection of islands and islets, physically joined by reclamation, roads, trains, vehicles and bridges and metaphorically linked by narratives. Such has been the scale of the territorial reconstruction of the city that the bodily feeling of crossing from one island to another is simply gone. Today, millions criss-cross the multiple islands and islets without giving it a second thought. Mumbai, then, is no longer an island in the territorial or physical sense of the term; it is at best a city with coastal features, multiple sea views and amazing seafood.

That which architects an island out of Mumbai today is its set of distinct and multivocal narratives, several of them directly traceable to the unique configurations of the city's physical ports and its digital imaginaries. To study these narratives through the lens of a single methodology would be grossly inadequate. They have to be understood and analysed by a multitude of methodologies coming together, from ethnography, social anthropology, political science, economics, human geography, social construction of technology, film studies and media analysis. Mumbai's ports and digital ports have architected such a unique narrative architecture of the city that not only does it stand out in relation to the larger Indian narratives of urbanity, city, citizenship, economy and the nation, but also in relation to the larger global narratives of the ideal city and notions of urban living. Maybe, like *Rashomon*, the city must be understood and analysed as a movie. To understand Mumbai, one must delve into its stories. To understand its stories, one must dive deep into its characters. To understand its characters one must unravel their motivations. To understand their motivations, one must excavate their foundations. Mumbai's foundations are its sea, coasts and ports. Understand them, and you will possibly understand Mumbai better.

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