



Q
and
a

with **Suketu Mehta**

Is he the insider, the outsider or a traveller in transit? Straddling two worlds, New-York based, award-winning writer, Suketu Mehta, is happy with the last description. His latest offering, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost And Found*, outcome of a seminal study of the city, has notched its niche in literati and glitterati circles. In a seaside chat with **MEHER MARFATIA** in Mumbai, the wordsmith expounds on love, life and strife in 'the continent of Bombay'.

Photographs by Siraj Zaveri



Extensively published journalist and fiction author, Suketu Mehta, has won the Whiting Writers Award, the O. Henry Prize and a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship. He also co-scripted the critically acclaimed film, *Mission Kashmir*. Now, Salman Rushdie hails his new work 'the best book written about that great, ruined metropolis'. *Publishers' Weekly* raves: "Mehta's sophisticated voice conveys postmodern Bombay with a carefully calibrated balance of wit and outrage, harking back to such great Victorian urban chroniclers as Dickens and Mayhew."

Superlative reviews fly across the globe, yet it is the warm reception his tome has just got in the city of his childhood that leaves Mehta 'flabbergasted, moved to tears'. Penning with passion an authentic picture of Mumbai, the itinerant Kolkata-born writer's bond with the only place he calls his own – despite living in Paris, London and New York – makes a compelling relationship and reading theme.

When it has become fashionable to present books on Bombay, have you deliberately defined yours as 'an anti-travel book'?

This is not a romantic vision of where I grew up, till the family relocated abroad when I was 14. It's a book propelled by obsession, rather than idle curiosity about this landmark city. Caring for Bombay, I focus on its realities. Bombay is

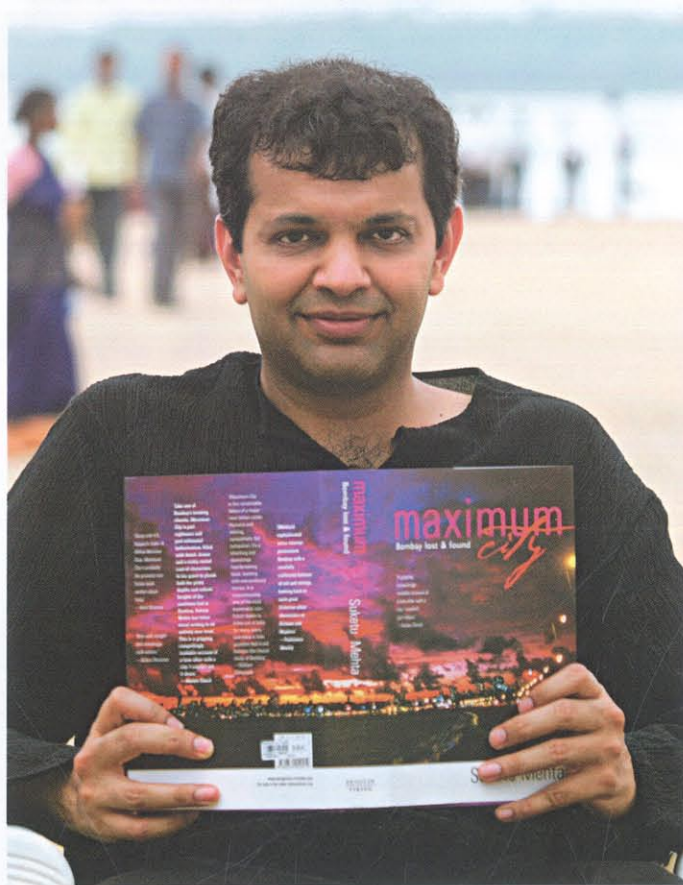
really a harbinger of the great sprawling mega-cities increasingly going to dominate the planet in our century. They are all plagued by universal concerns: overpopulation, poverty, communal conflict, AIDS, middle class housing and schooling. In fact, award-winning author and journalist, Pico Iyer finds my book a good guide to his own current reporting on Rio.

You write, 'I existed in New York but I lived in India, taking little memory trains.' On successive trips back to Bombay, what was strikingly different?

While nostalgia is an excellent Petri dish, this metro proves hostile to nostalgic returnees. Some memory trains you can't ride alone. Revisiting childhood territory as an adult brings a transformed perspective. When, with excitement, I showed my young sons the old building compound I'd jumped around in, they quietly commented, 'That's a parking lot, not a playground...'

What was your experience with racist encounters in the early days in the Queens neighbourhood of New York?

Schooling in that working class white enclave was bad. I was the odd brown boy out. Ironically, the same school is about 30 per cent Indian today. Ghettos form everywhere. It's been tough enough encapsulating into a book a city like Bombay that one is obsessed with. To depict its polarities is even harder. In a place,



“Revisiting childhood territory as an adult brings a transformed perspective. When, with excitement, I showed my young sons the old building compound I’d jumped around in, they quietly commented, ‘That’s a parking lot, not a playground...’”

putting in close proximity 14 million, soon swelling to 18 million, how can people possibly not have mutual understanding? We’re absolutely meant to know each other’s lives. But most citizens occupying their bubbles in Colaba or Malabar Hill haven’t walked a Jogeshwari lane. Big cities are deeply schizophrenic, Victor Hugo observed. It’s a valid dichotomy. Bombay is a city of internal exiles.

You’ve managed remarkable first-hand dope researching the seamier side of the city – slumlords, underworld dons, rival gangs, bar girls, eunuchs and criminals...

Yes, I became tremendously involved with them. They’re incredibly dynamic individuals leading extreme lives. These people are a vital part of the city’s underbelly that its other half doesn’t want to acknowledge. Interestingly, like the bar girls – women with a strong agency operation behind them – not everyone undergoes blanket exploitation.

Originally from Gujarat, how did you react to news of the Godhra riots?

I was in Sri Lanka then and felt ashamed of being Gujarati. A sickness entered and has stayed in Gujarati society since. I still can’t write about it. People actually believed ‘It was justified.... They killed us, we killed them.’ India lacks political will and an effective judicial system. I have to say, when 9/11 happened, I was proud of New York. Barring a few incidents of Sikhs mistaken for Arabs, there was peace. The history of each city is marked by a catalytic event. Bombay’s was the 1992-93 riots and bomb blasts period.

There are recurring references to various characters’ children throughout the book.

The world is divided, not between rich and poor or north and south, but between parents and the childless. At the age of 32, when I thought I’d lost my sense of wonder, I became a parent in the single most defining moment of my life. Children alter everything about anyone’s worldview. The Indian royalties of *Maximum City...* are going towards the Legal Defence Fund for Children. My next book, *Alphabet*, unfolds as narrated by a foetus in gestation.

What would you want changed immediately in Bombay?

Mantralaya and other government offices must move out of the city. Having an administrative capital beyond Bombay is an idea I’d love to see implemented.

And what do you miss most when away from this city?

The people, their wonderful ‘*chutneyfied*’ street speech colloquialisms, the typical ‘*bindaas Bambaitya*’ local accents!

How far do you find Indian media changed?

Where advertisers rule, journalism retreats from being substantive. It remains an outstanding atrocity that the country’s premier publication has no books or arts section. When Pg. 3 becomes Pg. 1, you have a serious problem. Newspapers have a particular function: not simply to make money for their proprietors but to serve as a marketplace for the exchange of ideas.

Your book asks, ‘Can you go home again?’ So, can you?

Writing about Bombay has been a way of coming home. Through the book I’ve found the city I searched for again. Had I not left, to intermittently return, *Maximum City...* would never have happened. Being a literary migrant checking in, checking out, then checking in again, offered fresh insights. After 21 years I’ve seen the city reveal itself, besides journeying the distance to discover the cities within myself. **V**