

MAPPING MUMBAI

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IN A 10-PART SERIES, THE WRITER UNCOVERS LITTLE-KNOWN STORIES BEHIND WELL-KNOWN PEOPLE AND PLACES

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OF PEACOCKS, PALACES AND THE PROGRESSIVES

What's in a name? Quite some, when you consider the trio of titles for a single stretch of street. Breach Candy, Warden Road, Bhulabhai Desai Road.

Curiosity and excitement make me dig for details explaining how the street I call home came to be multiply christened.

To start from the path of precise geographic logic — 'Breach' was the word suggested by a gap in the rocks the land mass formed, linking its Arabian Sea flank to the Mahalaxmi and Byculla flats beyond. 'Candy' could well be the anglicised way to pronounce *khind*, meaning 'a pass'.

Warden Road took after Francis Warden, who was chief secretary to the Government of Bombay in the 1810s, and later became director of the East India Company.

After the English exited, the precinct paid tribute to Bhulabhai Desai, the charismatic jurist and Congress freedom fighter who defended Indian Army soldiers on trial for treason post-World War I. His philanthropic vision founded the Bhulabhai Desai Institute — the true precursor to the National Centre for the Performing Arts.

Neighbourhood natter often focused with fascination on the sea-hugging rockery dubbed Scandal Point. This had an interesting romantic wartime association. It was the niche popular for sweet rendezvous as courting soldiers stole sunset moments with their girls, amid cawing crows nesting for the night.

A diagonal distance from Scandal Point, cartoonist R K Laxman lived opposite Lincoln

SATISH MALWADE

House — till recently the American Consulate — for nearly 70 summers. He can recall peacocks roaming private gardens, their shrill calls drowning the low purr of gleaming Rolls Royces. Architectural gems, palaces of the Maharaja of Wankaner (the US Consulate), Bhavnagar (Sophia College) and Vandsa (Anand Bhavan) graced sprawling plots. Across from the Laxmans, the Saklatvala family residence presided over Top Khana, which referred to canons positioned there to beat back invasive seaside attacks. Beside, Battery House earned its name likewise.

Opposite the Consulate, in 1936, the Aga Khan himself presided over the housewarming ceremony of Mecklai Mansion. When it was sold to a Sindhli builder, the 11-storey replacement, Peacock Palace — my present address — possibly became one of Breach Candy's first skyscrapers. Local lore insists an eccentric colonel resident would coolly walk a panther on the pavement as if it were a pet puppy.

Down the block from these rowed genteel palaces and parks rose a defining cultural hub. Bombay's artistic fervour came to be distilled at 89, Bhulabhai Desai Road. A vibrant icon from the 1950s, the Bhulabhai Desai Institute emerged as the throbbing heart of creativity in the city. This marvellous melting pot of all the arts was located where the Akash Ganga building stands today opposite Tata Garden.

Run by Madhuriben, Bhulabhai Desai's daughter-in-law, its estate comprised two bungalows set amid lush landscaping. She lived in Hasman, now with the Dubashes who retain the bungalow's original name. Madhuriben helped



The Bhulabhai Desai Institute stood where skyscraper Akash Ganga does today

emerging artists assisted by Soli Batliwala, a friend of Bhulabhai's son Dhirubhai. For the daily rent of a single rupee, Husain, Raza, Tyeb Mehta, Bakre, Gaitonde and Ara were provided balcony studios. So were sculptor B Vithal and his painter wife B Prabha, sitar maestros Ravi Shankar and Vilayat Khan. Thespian Ebrahim Alkazi, who ran his drama school on the terrace, had audiences willingly march up six flights to watch tragedies like *Oedipus Rex*. Even as a young Husain sketched edgy posters for a production of *Medea*. Vijaya Mehta's remarkable experimental theatre lab *Rangayan* was born here too.

'Chimalkar's Toyshop, Reader's Paradise, Chimanbhoy Fatbhoy jewellery store, Bombelli's confectioners... Past the saluting cardboard bellboy of the Band Box laundry, the road leads us home' wrote Rushdie. Except for the little bookshop none of those pre-1947 haunts still stand. But one hotspot *Midnight's Children* lists, so lyrically describing this palm-fringed, breeze-kissed street, stays in mind for a personal reason. A little over half a century ago my parents had celebrated a milestone of their own right here. He proposed, she accepted — and off they went to Bombelli's to seal the deal over vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce.