

## MAPPING MUMBAI

BY MEHER MARFATIA

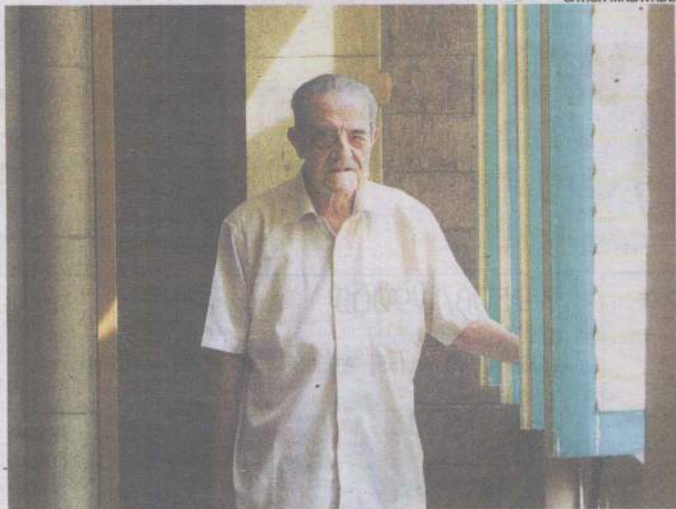


IN A 10-PART SERIES, THE WRITER UNCOVERS LITTLE-KNOWN STORIES BEHIND WELL-KNOWN PEOPLE AND PLACES

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# The Latin legacy

SATISH MALAVADE



Fr Peter Ribes, the city's last Latin tutor, has taught generations in schools like St Stanislaus and St Mary's from 1950 to 1980

"It's only all Bang Bang now!" That's Fr Peter Ribes, the city's last Latin tutor, lamenting the loss of what he considers the three most beautiful languages gifted to man. "Latin, Greek and Sanskrit have few takers today," he says. "I call the modern Babel I hear around me the Bang Bang languages. They are soulless."

This Spanish priest at St Stanislaus School in Bandra speaks with passion and attends to parishioners he counsels with remarkable energy at 89. Recouping from a fall, he hands me a copy of *32 Brain Shorts: Stories to Set you Thinking*, the fifth book he has bravely authored despite being dogged by macular degeneration.

Strange, this absolute authority on classic Latin knew not a syllable of English when he stepped on Bombay soil 70 years ago as a young clergyman. Ribes recounts with a smile how he happened to be "fortuitously sent to India". Raised in a Barcelona family of lawyers, doctors and engineers, he decided to quietly step out alone. Assuring his Jesuit superior he was ready and waiting to go wherever in the world he was meant to serve as a missionary.

Ribes was responsible for sharing the nuanced intricacies of this fine lingua to appreciative generations in schools like St Stanislaus and St Mary's from 1950 to 1980. It is almost four decades since he finished teaching a final class, stirring passages from Virgil's epic *Aeneid* and Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* commentaries on the Gallic and Civil wars. "He reached out with ease to every boy. It was magical how he made a supposedly dead language come wonderfully alive," recalls Dallas Pereira, a former pupil.

Ribes is naturally nostalgic as he explains Gregorian chants or the noble cadences of the school motto 'Natus ad maiora' — from 'Ad maiora natus sum' — 'I am born for greater things (therefore I choose the better things)'. Change is inevitable, he agrees. Yet quips in regret: "We are trapped in an age of information, no formation.

Communication technology has made us closer to each other and still so distant. There is terrifying loneliness all around. I find far too many sad old men sitting in pews, on park benches, everywhere you look."

I see him struggle to stay cheerful, trying not to overly dwell on times past. Mistily lapsing into lyrical phrases, he seeks solace in lofty Latin lines. "We must celebrate the antiquities," he declares. "Latin is at the root of Western culture, Greek at the root of Eastern culture. Their words are unimaginably expressive of such a range of emotions and experiences. Over 60 per cent of English is Latin. It stems from more Latin than Saxon words. Their structure and syntax make these inflected languages challenging." Not to mention grand, I whisper to myself, watching him write 'Audentes fortuna juvat' (Fortune favours the brave), an axiom that makes obvious the origin of the adjective 'audacious'.

But sheer wistful remembrance of the way things were does not consume Ribes. Dramatically different though it is from his first years here, the city of his adoption continues to inspire a strong sense of belonging. "Bombay has been very accepting. I don't need Spain. Much fulfillment and joy lie right here," he asserts with feeling.

From where we sit talking, my eyes feast on the exquisite stained glass windows of the consecrated St Peter's Church. They glow luminous in the slants of a crisp early morning sun. The moment compels me to ask the master his favourite classic dictum to live by. 'Noverim te, noverim me' he responds with pitch-perfect profundity — 'May I know you, may I know myself.'