
CITY AS STAGE: SPECULATION AND CATASTROPHE IN THE BOMBAY BLASTS

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Recently, during a discussion about an exhibition on Bombay to be held in New York, a friend suggested that I use my work on the Bombay Blasts of 1993 as a way of linking the two cities, Bombay (now known as Mumbai) and New York. The blasts she was referring to took place in 1993, around the same time as the Twin Towers were first attacked. On March 12th, 1993, ten explosions rocked Bombay within a period of two hours. The RDX bombs that caused the explosions were planted strategically in and around important city buildings and installations and timed to go off in a serial fashion, at intervals of 15-30 minutes. Their itinerary unfolded along a south-north trajectory, starting from the historic Bombay Stock Exchange building in the old colonial Central Business District and ending with an aborted explosion at the airport in the northern suburb of Juhu. In the words of journalist Hussein Zaidi, who recently published a superb journalistic account of the blasts and the investigations, the blasts took place «with almost metronomic precision at short intervals. Between 1.28 pm and 3.35 pm, bombs had gone off across Bombay, the first time any city in the world was subject to serial blasts.» The toll from the blasts included over two hundred and fifty killed or missing and over seven hundred injured. This scene is depressingly familiar today with blasts of all sorts engineered by diverse actors in the name of any number of causes. So when this friend suggested that a presentation of the urban

specificity of Mumbai could be presented to New York through the link of serial attack, it was an invitation to think otherwise very different urban conditions through a familiar trope.

But the problem is that even while they may promote «empathy» between very diverse cities, such equivalences seem to confirm the logic espoused by people like Samuel Huntington that pits civilizations against each other – in this case «civilizations» as diverse as the Judeo-Christian West and «Hindu» India against a putatively common, global enemy even if these connections are never explicitly made in part because the attacks on Bombay, the first attacks of a serial kind, never garnered the kind of world attention that such sorts of events do these days, post 11th September. The fact remains that these sorts of serially coordinated attacks are still quite rare and, in my view, might provide the grounds for thinking through some interesting political, social and physical issues confronting our urban world today. Among such serial attacks, we can count Bombay/Mumbai (first in 1993 and less dramatically in August 2003), the Tokyo Underground gas attack in 1995, New York in 2001, Madrid and Istanbul in 2004.

Most specifically, in relation to the theme of this panel, we should note that the commemorative valence of such events – that is the capacity of events that attack the body of the city (which I shall explore further on) to create memory or *com-memore* – is extremely diverse and should be thought through carefully if for no other reason than as a way of reflecting on the genealogies of the general and the particular in relation to contemporary modernisms. More often than not, within the discourses of the social sciences, this relationship is thought through in a highly historicist manner, informed by binaries like north-south, modern-traditional, etc. While I broadly agree with Nigel Thrift's appeal for a less apocalyptic view of the contemporary city, I believe that carefully tracing the recollection and imagination of such traumas might actually help us to move away from various sorts of problematic, historicist readings that render false equivalences on the one hand and exaggerated differences on the other between modern, urban situations.

Thus, for example, the memory culture surrounding the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers and the subsequent repair of the city is substantially different from that surrounding the Bombay blasts. My attempt here will be to try to move beyond the more obvious, culturalist explanations in thinking these events together. In this regard, I am reminded of the work of Zarina Hashmi, a New York based Indian Artist, who recently produced a series of wood-cut prints of nine «cities» wound-

ed and injured by calculated acts of war – among the cities included are two non-cities – the UN safe haven of Srebrenica and Jenin while the others were Sarajevo, Grozny, Kabul, Baghdad, Beirut, Ahmedabad and New York. The prints are representationally divided into several types – first there are the cities like Sarajevo, Kabul, Baghdad whose geo-bodies are familiar to us through satellite images, whose specific natural and infrastructural features are depicted as cuts on the body. This also applies to the images of Grozny and Ahmedabad, which are less familiar in the news but equally subjected to destruction. As far as the camps are concerned, the wound is the very thickness and unnatural shapes of the boundaries of these places – cut by geo-politics and multilateral calculations which Zarina then fills in with gridded streets in the case of Jenin and with coffins in the case of the UN safe haven (or rather unsafe haven) of Srebrenica. Finally, the depiction of New York is entirely monumental, where the memory of wound and attack is reduced to two solid, vertical black blocks. In another series of wood-cuts, Zarina similarly depicts Jerusalem Al-Quds, its division among national and colonial interests in a manner that foregrounds its unrepresentability – she uses a simple black line and carves out the geographical coordinates of Jerusalem on the wood-cut. These attempts at producing such representations are subtle and powerful insofar as they convey meaning through condensations of various kinds which in turn produce resonances and connections among disparate places, apparently not linked to one another at a local level.

These are representations of a new global, cultural history through the production of new kinds of connections. But what I want to develop is a meditation on a different sort of art, an art of *speculative* urbanism that seems to arise out of situations of attack and that seems to undergrid and connect the modern histories of cities as diverse as Mumbai, New York, Madrid, Tokyo. This art is connected specifically with the place of infrastructure in the imagination of the modern city (or its invisibility as the case may be) and the subtle, underground capacity of infrastructural systems and their functioning to act as flows for memory and recollection and for our understanding of what constitutes the modern in the contemporary moment.

The amorphous, ambiguous nature of the South Asian city in urbanist literature provides an interesting point of departure. Unlike most other regions, the city in modern South Asia has been the site of considerable ambivalence. If there is anything normative about the city in South Asia, it is rather the rejection of its specificity as a social space and its portrayal, either positively or negatively (depending upon the stripe of anti-colonial nationalist thought) as merely an engine of modernization and

development. As the historian and political scientist Partha Chatterjee has claimed recently, there was never an «organic» imagination of the desired, modern Indian city of the future leaving it bereft of the sort of normative modernist moorings that are foregrounded both in colonialist thought (such as the Apartheid city in South Africa) as well as in other sorts of nationalist traditions elsewhere that celebrate the city as a site of freedom. What specifically happens to this imagination in the context of the kinds of attacks, like the serial blasts, that attempt to take on the city as a geo-body is a question of interest.

In a longer version of my work on the events of 1993, I work out of the particular space of the serial attacks on Bombay/Mumbai to think through the powerful currents of spatial reformatting that have been sweeping the city since the early nineties under the aegis of specific, neo-liberal initiatives to transform Mumbai into a global city. I connect the demolition (or at least the symbolic demolition) of the city's key commercial and national sites – including the historic Bombay Stock Exchange building, the headquarters of the national airline carrier, Air-India, the Regional Passport Office as well as the city's transport systems including the suburban bus and railway systems (which form the city's spine, both literally and symbolically) to a larger program of demolition that ripped through the city throughout the nineties and continues into the present under the auspices of a new infrastructural and cadastral politics. I attempt to think of the kinds of memory politics unleashed by these political and calculated acts of demolitions that fill space in new ways but leave subterranean wounds that are symbolically equivalent to those unleashed by destructive acts. There is, in other words, a way in which memory emerges not just in the act of violence but in literal acts of re-collecting the fragments that might help us understand the complexities of historic cities as sites and repositories of memory.

These politics, supported by the necessary changes in property laws and urban regulation (including in Mumbai the systematic subversion of rent control laws and the urban land ceiling act as well as other colonial legacies that imagined the city as a «singular site controlled under the authority of a master plan or an optimal ecology of pieces») are reshaping cities throughout India today. Aided by multilateral institutions like the World Bank, Mumbai has been implementing mega-infrastructural projects like the MUTP (Mumbai Urban Transportation Project) and more recently the Mumbai Urban Infrastructure Project (a vague collection of massively disruptive projects that are reinscribing the symbolic geography of the city both explicitly and implicitly because of their spectral echoes in the realms of dehousing and popula-

tion transfers on very large scales). Indeed the mantra of infrastructure is everywhere – it has been deployed, for example, in the election campaign of the ruling party in the form of the slogan «bijli-sadak-paani» (electricity-roads-water) which in turn echoes earlier election promises of «roti-kapda-makan» (food-clothing-shelter) that were part of the government's promises in the era of the socialist state. These campaigns are facilitating the ripping apart of existing urban fabrics for the insertion of new systems, on the ground, above the ground and under the ground (and sometimes at all three levels simultaneously). Newspapers abound in tales like the one about people riding the Delhi Metro on the day of its inauguration (Jan 1st, 2003) and refusing to get off, as if transfixed by the new experience of the underground. In Mumbai the construction of 55 flyovers all over the city within the last five years has fundamentally transformed not only the visual experience of the city but also brought new visibility to both the possibilities of a «vertical city» the «city on the ground», to its infractions and possibilities (an «overexposed city» in a slightly different sense than that used by Virilio). The vertical city, for those familiar with Mumbai, was being constructed simultaneously in the northern reaches of the city, away from the transforming global centre in the form of fantastical and somewhat grotesque, post-modern towers and complexes housing the ITES and BPO industries – call-centres and software development outfits along with new experiments in leisure and retail experiences that are schooling a new, upwardly mobile middle-class into becoming new sorts of urban social collectivities.

That this new urbanism should have been inaugurated in the mixture of blood, glass and concrete that erupted on that Black Friday (as Friday, March 12th, 1993 has come to be known in Mumbai) seems both perverse and, in a curious way, fitting in with a larger transformation in the production of post-colonial space, mixed as it actually is with concrete and glass among other materials. The growth of Indian cities in the colonial era was largely tied to one of two patterns – the military model that was based on blasting through the recalcitrant «native» city, making visible its secrets and lies (as in the case of Lucknow) or the *tabula rasa* model, followed in the construction and provisioning of port cities like Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. The spectral effects of these models continue to reverberate in the new urbanism directed largely against the poor and against minorities. But perhaps equally significant are the swathes of urban developments that are encircling historic cities, cities in their municipal logics, constituted typically by an inwardness and *intramural* political and social culture. These developments are in turn facilitated by a new imaginary geog-

raphy carved around «Zones» – Special Economic Zones, Agricultural Export Zones, etc. that are envisioned as points of interchange and switching in a national system of mobilities – of roads, waterways and airways, which in turn are imaged through the geometric forms of triangles, corridors, quadrilaterals, etc.

I will have to leave for later a more detailed analysis of the relationship between these forms of urbanism and the post-bourgeois phase of capitalism best characterized by the new avatars of the TNC and the presence of the new «Orgman». As a number of scholars have noted, these new avatars are dependent upon softwares and «devices working on «just in time» principles of fluid and continuous synchronization» (as Steve Graham and Simon Marvin have put it) or on the principles of adjustment and the amplification of adjustment between distributed sites as architect Keller Easterling puts it. I note this here as part of a larger attempt to track the tie between new capital, military action and the deployment of militaristic efficiency (as noted by Sekula in *Fish Story*, the archetypal symbol and driver of capital in our era – the container – is, like many other such drivers and devices, a product of military research in its relentless quest for efficiency) into civilian enterprise and space. The generation of value has the hallucinatory quality found in Marx's theory of the commodity as fetish. Yet, what is produced and extracted as value not only depends crucially upon destruction but makes this destruction transparent in fields as diverse as logistics and contemporary memory culture. Value here is created through the very movement of the goods themselves, through their incessant redistribution as parts or wholes which underlies all masquerades of efficiencies, through the reformatting of destroyed productions, environments and built forms (including, for example, bunkers and oil rigs, dumping grounds and other brownfields) into useful, productive and happy spaces. It is in this context, where seas of urbanism anchor and hold down capital (even to the extent of turning the liquidity of the oceans into hard, solid surfaces that act in turn as factories and in turn as incarcerators) that the *impress* of terror (as Derrida puts it in a recent interview) in the empiricist sense of impress as that which allows for an *empirical* apprehension of the event, takes place. Which brings me back to Mumbai 1993...

The blasts of 1993 are widely believed to be an act of revenge by certain groups belonging to the minority Muslim community, offered as a response to the destruction of a 16th century mosque in Ayodhya in Northern India on December 6th 1992. This event was immediately followed by riots in several parts of the country, the most severe of which occurred in Mumbai in December 1992 and January 1993. The «riot», as a form of collective social violence has a specific genealogy in South

Asia, which is quite well known through the writings of historians on colonialism, secularism and the historical formation of majorities and minorities. While riots can and do break out simultaneously across cities, their scale is intimate, marking out specific territories and specific bodies for violation, leaving in their wake half-destroyed neighbourhoods and injured lives. Retaliation is swift, almost instantaneous, setting into motion a blindness that is nevertheless guided by the insight of specific targets, specific angers and specific grievances. The riot therefore seems to work, in the moment and in the aftermath, through certain evidentiary holes that spawn multiple narratives and implode time, space and memory into singular formations of silence or testimony. This dominant modality was ruptured fundamentally in the serial blasts of 1993 and I'd like to take up the last part of my presentation with the question of what this rupture means for the ways in which we think about cities and specifically about the categories of the modern and the post-colonial rather than offer an abstract meditation on terror and violence as such.

In August 2003, ten years after the 1993 blasts, Mumbai was once again targeted by two serial blasts, both placed in taxicabs directed to and parked in crowded locations. The bombings immediately recalled 1993 to residents of the city but this time they participated in an economy of international terror, as Mumbai joined the list of several cities thus attacked (but once again, they appear to use the city as a stage or a proxy site to take on the problem and paradox of the minority in the democratic space of a nation divided at birth). These attacks, like others of a similar orchestrated, coordinated nature – including of course the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Tokyo Underground attacks in 1995 and more recently the Madrid bombings share several features in common – first, as Virilio observes in *The Landscape of Events*, what is new about such attacks is that they mimic the strategies of WWII aerial bombing without the complete erasure of constructed space and bring to the fore the notion of *tabula rasa* as the site at which terror *impresses, imprints* itself. The capacity of violence to com-memorate – to create memory or to stimulate imagination – thus takes place on a carefully prepared ground (an act that has its echoes in the targeted destruction of the Mosque by Hindu political activists in 1992 which Keller Easterling has referred to as an instance of violent «site preparation»). Second, the shock of seriality and the illusion of simultaneity mimics the very features that make infrastructural systems work as systems but with the opposite effect of freezing the system, the connections that make the city work within its municipal limits and within a *municipal* logic. Third (a point connected to the first), these

acts impose a new aesthetics of seeing, exposing the city as a connected whole, even whilst lying prone, as it were, in its blasted, battered form.

This effect is particularly central to understanding the symbolic links between these acts and our understanding of the modern in the contexts of the specific cities that have been targeted and beyond. For my claim is that another way of understanding these acts is to think of them as excavating the modern, both in contexts in which modernization as a process linked to the homogenizing power of infrastructure (and its concomitant ability to bestow universal citizenship) is an always incomplete process (as in the case of the post-colonial, «developing» city such as Mumbai) as well as in the contexts of the always, already modern (as in the case of the Tokyo Underground or the World Trade Center) of which infrastructure is the symbolic capital and, moreover, quite literally, infrastructure is the *archive* of the modern in the many senses of the term archive.

Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's fascination with the Underground as the symbolic site of the modern is expressed in his explorations of the Tokyo Underground gas attacks as acts that signal repressions within the national psyche precisely because they are conducted through the literal medium of a hyper-modern and absolutely sophisticated Underground system. Similarly, the ruins of the destroyed city on the ground are contrasted with a largely intact and transparently conductive sewer system underground in the post-war Vienna portrayed in Carol Reed's cinematic adaptation of Graham Greene's *The Third Man* (this underground system is transparent and modern precisely because of the multiplicity of meanings that can flow smoothly through it – disease and corruption as well as the possibilities of cleansing and uprooting of evil).

The use of infrastructural materials – the subway, the skyscraper and the street – the connective tissues of urban life whose very thingness enables the flows that are central to the very possibility of the city itself – is a new strategy that turns the city itself into weapon. Paradoxically, it is also through these destructions that the universal goals of liberal modernity are exposed and brought to light and, in a strange way, fulfilled through the forced rupture of space with what Virilio has called the question of time – «the regime of transhistorical temporality derived from technological eco-systems». As Ryan Bishop and Gregory Clancey observe in their article «The City as Target, or Perpetuation and Death» cities seem to achieve their status as global cities *insofar* as they become targets. How should we think of these assertions and observations of the *symbolic* structure of this increasingly dominant form of violence (or at least this form of violence that has captured global imagination since

9/11 so strongly that every instance appears as a repetition of that originary event). How then to account for the specificity of systemic transformations in the particular geographies of violence that are unfolding the world over? My intuition is to turn to the material specificities of the transformations in the links between urbanism and the infrastructural systems necessary to sustain global capital in its current forms. As cities *lose* particularity and become modern in the moment of their collapse (rather than becoming modern in the normative sense), the problem of the city as the normative site of democracy, as an *alternative* to the nation-state as a political form for membership and allegiance comes to the fore once again.

Awash in seas of urbanism in all the ways that several scholars and practitioners have been demonstrating, the city as municipal entity is losing particularity and becoming a stage for the work of violence and for the violent production of seemingly ancient memories. It also becomes a stage for assemblages, experiments and rearrangements to happen at scale and for the *polis-demos* connection to get made and unmade in a provisional, experimental and ephemeral fashion, defeating both our normative and historical understandings of cities. It is no accident that cities are increasingly concerned with and worry about strategies of selectively preserving built forms and reformatting those forms through the softwares of «heritage» even as the city as a spatio-temporal system can no longer be walled off and protected from interactions with urbanic hinterlands, both near and distant (in fact it is interesting to observe that architectural strategies of preservation in the post-WWII period oscillate between the bland neutrality of modernist architecture and the erasure of centuries of accretions in favour of architectural forms that supposedly reflect more «authentic» national identities). All this is of course happening against the backdrop of fundamental transformations in the territorial organization of power and sovereignty. Yet, the peculiar forms of *excavating* modernity by blasting open its *material* archives has yet to receive proper attention by social scientists. The dialectical movement between «vectoral» urbanism across the open spaces *outside* of cities politically understood and the city, driven by the role of material, infrastructural transformations hides a certain darkness that travels between and across these vectoral corridors. This movement also freezes the city as *territory* in an era of such viral circulations. Violence is an archaeological tool in excavating and interrogating the modernity of these new systems. It seems crucial then to tie the question about the limits of the city (which is increasingly becoming louder among urbanists) to questions about the territorial organization of power and sovereignty and universality of infrastructure as archive.
